NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield

The Monday Night talks and retreat teachings on the awakened heart (2016 onward)

Jack Kornfield

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CHAPTER 1

The Seat of Awakening

Jack Kornfield · 52 min

> *In this opening talk from a spring insight meditation retreat, Jack Kornfield invites practitioners to understand the profound significance of taking their seat of awakening—just as the Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi tree. Drawing from the mythological encounter between the Buddha and Māra, Kornfield illuminates how temptation, aggression, and doubt inevitably arise when we commit to stillness, and how these challenges can be met with compassion rather than resistance.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together wisdom from diverse sources—John Muir's exhilarating account of climbing a Douglas spruce during a fierce storm, Viktor Frankl's observations from concentration camps, and the teachings of Ajahn Chah—to illustrate the fearlessness required for genuine transformation. He emphasizes that fearlessness doesn't mean absence of fear, but rather the willingness to face whatever arises: bodily tension, restless thoughts, difficult emotions, grief, and the 'Freudian layer' of family conditioning.*
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> *The talk explores the foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), beginning with breath and body awareness, moving through feelings and mental states. Kornfield teaches that when we stop running and truly take our seat, a natural healing unfolds—the body releases its held tensions, emotions that want to be honored arise, and renewal becomes possible. Through the metaphor of fireflies rising from an alfalfa field, he points to how life naturally wants to renew itself when met with loving awareness. The invitation is to remember our true nature: not the body of fear, but the timeless awareness that witnesses all arising and passing phenomena.*

Good evening to you.

Here we've completed the first day of the retreat, and I'd like to talk about what we're doing here, why we're here—which may have occurred to you as a question during a particularly difficult sitting or windy walking. You think, "Gosh, I could have been in San Diego where it's sunny and on the beach, or maybe for the same amount of money gone to Hawaii."

I want to talk in particular about what it means to take the seat of awakening that we have together—to take a seat in the midst of this mystery of our human life, our human incarnation.

There is an artist in Colorado who created a beautiful temple, partly made out of beautiful cedar and wood, and in the center of it is a very large transparent crystal made of glass, six feet high or more. Inside are 7.2 billion grains of salt. It's about half full or a little bit more, and it rotates every twenty-four hours on two metal rods. She's the priestess of what she calls the salt monument. Every evening she goes with a jar of beautiful glass and pours out of the bottom 200,000 grains of salt, then does a ritual to bury them. That's the 200,000 people that died today on the planet. And every morning after the sun rises, she takes another beautiful vessel and pours in the top 250,000 grains of salt. That's the 250,000 people that were born today. And she does a prayer of blessing for each of those beings who come in.

So this is us. We take our seat like a Buddha under our own tree of enlightenment, like the bodhisattva of compassion, and sit in this mystery of human incarnation, quieting the mind, opening the heart. As we do, as we take this seat of awakening, then Mara appears.

For those of you not familiar with Mara by name, Mara was here visiting you today. Mara is the mythological name in India for the god or being who represents all the troubles and struggles and pains and difficulties of the world. As the story is told—the myth of the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment—seated under the tree of awakening, Mara attacked with temptations of all different kinds. When that didn't work, then came the armies of Mara, all kinds of aggression. When the spears of Mara's army and the flaming arrows came at the Buddha seated there under the tree, he raised his hand. There are these beautiful paintings of this. He touched each one with the heart of compassion. A little drawing in the painting has a line going from his heart to his fingertips. And the arrows and spears turned into flower petals and fell at his feet.

Then Mara said, "Alright, temptation isn't going to do it for you and aggression won't get you. How about doubt? By what right do you have to sit here and think that you should awaken, that you can awaken?"

At that moment, the gesture that the Buddha made was to touch the earth with one hand. You see lots of these mudras or expressions in the Buddhist iconography. He said, "The earth is my witness that I have a right to sit here, that I have earned through countless eons of patience and compassion and care and devotion and understanding, that I and all beings have a right to sit here and remember who we really are. We have a right to awaken."

In that moment of touching the earth, saying "the earth is my witness," this gesture is really the gesture for you as well, as Mara comes. Anybody notice Mara today? Don't raise your hand, no need. He gets around, you know. Yes, he was in ancient India, but somehow he found you in Yucca Valley. How could this be?

What this story tells us, what it reminds us of, is our capacity to awaken, to touch the earth. The earth is my witness. I, you, we have the capacity to awaken the mind and heart wherever we are. And to awaken no matter what. With the worst aggression and the worst fear and the worst doubt, we still have the capacity to take our seat in the midst of it all.

As Viktor Frankl said, "We who lived through the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but their very existence proves the last and final freedom of human beings—the freedom to choose your spirit no matter what the circumstance."

So here we are, and we stop. We take the seat of awakening. Rollo May said, "It is an ironic habit that human beings run faster when we have lost our way." On retreat, we stop and we take this seat. As we do, of course, all the worries and tasks and thoughts of work and money and family and the unfinished business of the heart and the creativity attacks and the addictions that we have and the ways that we're lost in thought—all those things come.

And it turns out you don't have to go to the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. You're in the perfect spot to awaken just where you are. When you stop and take the seat of awakening, then you will naturally encounter the forces that keep the mind small or limited or caught in all kinds of ways, as the Buddha did.

You'll encounter temptation and desire and greed and compulsion. You'll encounter frustration and anger and aggression and doubt—all of these things.

And yet when you look deeply with compassion, you see that there's really nothing more profound for you to do than to find that inner freedom, to not be caught by these powers and confusions and addictions that also catch the whole world and that you carry within you. Because it's very clear that no amount of computers and nanotechnology and biotechnology and space technology—all the outer technologies of the world—are going to stop the continuing warfare and continuing racism and continuing environmental destruction and confusion and tribalism. The outer developments have to be matched by the inner developments of humanity.

And so we have this extraordinary situation. In my pocket I have my smartphone, which contains the great library of Alexandria times a thousand. But we also know that there are some deep questions that can't be answered by Google—which is why you're here. The outer technology answers some things. But somehow human beings have to find in their hearts an equivalent development of interconnection and compassion, a new way of being.

It takes a kind of courage to do this. It's courageous of you to sign up and do a retreat, whether you've done them before or not. Each time is a kind of leaping in. And today it was cold and windy. You came from these nice warm places, maybe. Maybe you didn't.

I love the story of John Muir, who writes about "one of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed, in the Sierras in December 1874. When the storm began to sound, this huge storm, I lost no time in pushing deep into the woods to enjoy it. For nature always has something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof."

So the big storm is there and Muir says, okay, bring it on. He trekked to the top of the highest ridge in the neighborhood, "gained the summit to get my ear closer to the Aeolian music of its topmost needles. I made a choice of the tallest of a group of Douglas spruces that were over 150 feet high. Though comparatively young, their lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling with wild ecstasy in the wind." And he lashed himself to the top, in this great storm. You've got to picture this.

"Never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion. In its widest sweeps, my treetop described an arc from 20 to 30 degrees, but I felt sure of its elastic temper amidst all the other trees that were swaying, waving like fields of grain, rippling undulations of the trees like grasses from ridge to ridge, shiny foliage stirred by the great waves of the wind. And the sounds of the storms corresponded gloriously with this wild exuberance of light and motion—the profound bass of the naked branches and boles booming like waterfalls, the quick tense vibrations of the pine needles rising to shrill whistling hiss and falling to silky murmur, the rustling of laurel groves in the dells and the keen click of leaf upon leaf. All this was heard as attention calmly bent to the Aeolian music. I kept my lofty perch for hours, closing my eyes to enjoy the music itself and feast on the delicious fragrance streaming past of the warm rain and the balsamic buds steeped like tea."

So you're kind of doing the same thing, right? More or less. Muir was the man who took Teddy Roosevelt around California, brought him through Yosemite, and inspired him to begin the national park system. John Muir was really a sage, but he also had this capacity to stop and listen—to listen to something so vast and extraordinary.

Here you've taken your seat of awakening and Mara has come in all his glory. That's fine. Mara always gets here. And then what happens is sometimes our hearts get frightened. We're afraid to climb the ridge or lash ourselves to the tree or even stay in our seat and let go and allow ourselves to experience the sweep of the mystery and the appearance and disappearance of all things. Because whatever happened today is already gone. Mara made this huge show and you could barely stay in your seat. And where is he now? Back in Bihar taking a rest. He'll return, but he's in India for the moment, or wherever he goes back to.

When our hearts are frightened to touch all the things of the world, we contract and things become solid. And when they start to open, we see that it's waves of experience arising out of emptiness, appearing for a time and displaying themselves like that Aeolian music, and then vanishing.

To take the seat in the midst of all things requires a kind of fearlessness. And dharma practice, to really transform the heart, asks a fearlessness of you. But fearlessness doesn't mean no fear. It has a different meaning. In Tibet, it's traditional for Vajrayana practitioners to pray for difficulties. It's like, come on Mara, bring it on. May I have suffering in my life. Grant me suffering enough to

so that the great heart of compassion will open in me. That's not an American style prayer as far as I know. It's got a very different tenor to it. Because the goal of that isn't the goal of habit or comfort or the small self. It's really much more the goal of the liberation of the heart.

One of my favorite passages comes from Karl Friedrich Graf von Dürckheim, who was a Zen teacher in the Black Forest. He said: when faced with difficulty and challenges in your life, do not go and seek out those friends who comfort you, those friends who want to cushion you and keep the old small self in its place. But rather seek out those who encourage you to risk yourself and to take a step into the unknown, to be willing to face something greater than you have faced before—so that you are even willing to die, because it is only dying day by day into something new, only facing that which is unknown, that that which is indestructible can be born within you. Seek out those who recommend you to turn, when it's windy, to lean into the wind. To climb to

the top of the tree, to be willing to face that which is difficult, so that only when you face that and gone through it, maybe again and again, can that which is indestructible be born in your heart, be discovered in you.

Now, for those of you who are experienced students, I think I should say this, because you come and you think, okay, I've done retreats. Some of you are friends that I've known for ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, been coming back a long time. So it should be easy by now, right? You and Mara have a good relationship, right?

But I remember visiting Ajahn Chah, my teacher, when he was quite sick. He had diabetes and water in his brain. They put a shunt in. He had been in the hospital on and off for a long time. He was back in the monastery and I was staying with him. He was kind of weak. I bowed. I hadn't seen him for a while. We talked about how he was, and then I said to him, "Well, this is what you're always teaching us, that life includes illness and old age and sickness and death." And he peered back at me and he said, "Don't say that so glibly." I was like twenty-eight years old at that time going back to see him. He said, "Yeah, don't say that so glibly. Old age, sickness, and death, right?"

I was talking to Ram Dass in Hawaii about my own brushes with death and illness. And sometimes thinking, okay, I've done all these practices and I'll be really calm—I've done these trainings, sitting in the charnel grounds and imagining my own death and so forth. It'll be all easy. But at certain points it wasn't. And Ram Dass laughed. He said, "Oh, yeah, I flunked the course a bunch of times."

So it's important to understand that yes, you've trained, and yes, you have an acquaintance with Mara, even those more experienced. But it doesn't also necessarily mean that Mara won't return in all kinds of new forms and new phases of life.

So then what to do? Each time, you want to stop and turn toward it in some deep way and let yourself calm and make space for what's actually present, whatever it happens to be. And there's something beautiful that I watch and feel in the room as we sit together. Even though the first few days are restless and sleepy in their struggle, there's also something that starts to sweep across the room and through our hearts and psyches—a tenderness to it, and a courage, and a stillness. Even in the beginning, you start to feel, you might not even feel it in yourself, but you look around and all these other people are sitting so still, they look like Buddhists. You don't know how crazy it is in their minds, but they look really good. You're looking good, right? And there's something that starts to happen in the field. And you start to remember, oh yeah, it's possible to stop and really be present.

Nelly Sachs, a wonderful poet who won the Nobel Prize, wrote these poems after the Holocaust and the Second World War: "Someone will take the ball from the hands that play the game of terror. Stars have their own law of fire and their fertility is the light. And reapers and harvesters are not native here. Far off stand their granaries."

Straw, too, has a momentary power of illumination, painting loneliness. Someone will come and sew the green of the spring bud on their prayer shawl and set the child's silken curl as a sign on the brow of the century. And here amen must be said, this crowning of words which moves into hiding. And peace, you great eyelid, closing on all unrest, your heavenly wreath of lashes brings you the most gentle of all births.

And somehow she found this place of stillness even after a life of tremendous tragedy and struggle.

So we start to sense what it means just to stop and breathe, to open to the vastness of the desert and the vastness of the mind. We begin to unlayer the foundations of mindfulness as we're talking each day—starting with breath and body, then moving through the foundations of feelings and thoughts. And you start to feel the breath breathe herself, himself. This mystery of inter-breathing with the winds that sweep the desert and the breath of the person next to you and the breath of the coyote behind the rocks and the breath of the lizard and the winds that brushed Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa and flowed over the Pacific and came to the desert to you. You are part of all of that vastness.

Then you start to pay attention to your body. It breathes. It's bigger than what you thought. It's part of this whole interbeing of breath. But of course, at first the body can be full of tension that we carry. Why is your body hurting while meditating? Are you sitting the wrong way? Not likely. It's because you sit quietly and then your body says, "Hey, remember me? You've been running me around. Every time you got uptight, you clenched your jaw. Your shoulders took a little hit, and your back." Pretty soon you sit quietly and your body hurts, and it's just saying, "Here, let me allow you to feel what you've been carrying."

If you stay present—if, as Mary Oliver writes, you let the soft animal of your body love what it loves—you begin to feel that it wants to open. Even if you feel the pain of it for a time, it then starts to release: the trembling, the tightness. As you allow the mindfulness, it begins to unfold.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the Tibetan Lama and son of Chögyam Trungpa, is a very experienced horseman, as was his whole family. He writes about taking his favorite horse, Rocky, up a high mountain trail at eleven thousand feet or more in the Rocky

Mountains. Rocky was great on the plains—a galloping horse, a horse in the ring—but he had never done high trail riding. It was a narrow trail. You know, trail horses know how to back up or turn around, but Rocky had never done this.

So they came to a place where there was a very narrow trail, a steep cliff on the left, and a thousand-foot drop on the right, a little bit of scree, not so easy. Rocky slowed down and paused. Sakyong Mipham looked at it and thought, "He could slip and we could both die." Before they started, he shifted himself a little to the left in the saddle—in case Rocky slipped, he could bail off and hold on to the rock. He shifted his weight, and then Rocky turned his head around and looked at him with his big eye, as if to say, "You what? I thought we were in this together." And then Sakyong Mipham realized what he was doing and shifted himself back to the center of the saddle. Rocky nodded, went very carefully, and they made it.

This is really what it means to take a seat in your body. There will be parts you want to move away from, squirm away from—it's too hard. When you bring mindfulness to your body, when you take the seat of awakening, you begin to allow the tension and pain. Your body starts to sing its music to you—some of it throbbing and tingling and opening, some of it twisting and tight and fiery. You allow the music of the body, and you make a wise relationship with it.

And then, of course, you get your mind. Alas, Hafez writes, the mind is ever a tourist wanting to touch and buy new things and toss them into an already full closet. It has no pride, and it secretes thoughts just like your salivary gland secretes saliva. You sit here, and sometimes it's like you're in Motel 6 late at night, and you're on some bad TV channel, and the channel won't turn off. Ninety percent of your thoughts are repeats—have you noticed that? And if you could hear the thoughts of the person next to you through a little speaker, you would think, "Huh?" And then, "Oh, really?" And then you'd start to shift your seat away, like, "Wow, really?" It's pretty wild in there.

And it's not like you're supposed to stop it. I love that New Yorker cartoon showing a car crossing the vast Utah desert, and there's a roadside billboard that says, "Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles." That's a little like meditation.

So you get to see the mind, and it does everything. With mindfulness, you begin to be present for the mind doing its thing. You begin to be present for the body, as we've talked about. You also begin to be present for all the moods and emotions, which are like the weather of the desert. The sun shines, and then the clouds come, and the sprinkles of rain. A huge wind comes up, then it settles down, and it's absolutely still. And then it gets wild again.

One of my favorite things to watch and show people on YouTube—it's not a cat video, I promise you. There's a famous experiment done by Walter Mischel who was testing four-year-old children about deferred gratification. It's a very famous psychological experiment, because it turns out that if young children have learned at four or five years old to defer gratification, that's a kind of inner strength, like John Muir, where they can move through the world. It's a great predictor of success, and it's something you want to foster in them—a little bit of grit, or whatever the education word of the day might be.

So there you are, you watch the YouTube video, and they bring this hapless little boy or girl, four years old, and set them in a chair. There's one marshmallow on a plate, and they say, "Just sit quietly, we'll be back in a couple of minutes, and if you can sit with the marshmallow and not eat it, then we'll bring you two marshmallows." And they close the door. And you watch these kids' faces, staring at it. Sometimes they'll reach out, and they even touch it, and they squish it a little, and then they pull back. One kid picked it up and looked around, took a tiny little lick of it and put it back. They are struggling so hard not to eat that marshmallow.

So your emotions will come. Desire will come. It's supposed to come. We're desire beings. You can't get rid of desire. It's like being on a diet, as the poet says, and hiding the chocolate chip cookies. And you're the only person in the entire galaxy who knows where the chocolate chip cookies are hidden. Desire is part of being human. So you have to sit with Mara appearing in desire form.

Or your loneliness comes. And if you can't bear your loneliness or your restlessness or your boredom, what do you do? When you're home, the minute you get lonely or bored, what do you do? You open the refrigerator. Or you go online. Because you can't be with yourself. So here, when it comes, you say, okay. Again, as the poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness too quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few human ingredients can."

So you sit with it. Restless, bored, lonely. Your love, your joy, your tenderness, your fear, your confusion. Because it's all in there. War is in you. Hate is in you. Racism is in you. Courage, compassion, doubt. The tainted glory of humanity is there for you to experience when you take the seat of awakening. And your gift is to be able to open yourself to it and give a bow to each one. It's like the Buddha touching those spears with the heart of compassion and saying, yes, this too, this too is part of being human.

And the main thing is not to judge it. If you're sleepy, you know why you're sleepy? You've been running around. Your body says, "Hey, God, you're quiet now. Thank you. Oh, sleep time." You need it. And if you think that it's a bad thing, just go to an ashram or a Zen monastery in Japan or India in the afternoon for the noonday demons to arise.

All these great meditators are nodding off. It's just part of your humanity, and you'll get all of your humanity as you sit here. So the point isn't to judge it. As Auden the poet says, the point is to love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart.

Just to see that we're all in it together. And it's not about perfecting yourself according to some ideal of how you're supposed to be. It's about perfecting your love, your capacity to really love this life that we've been given.

And so practice, to begin with, in this seat of awakening is simply to bow to what happens and say, "Ah yes, this too." And to feel your life breath breathing itself in the midst of it all. Later we'll talk about how, once you've taken this seat of awakening and you're able to stay centered and wise, there's all manner of things that need to be responded to. So it's not just passive. But this is the first critical, important step.

In taking this seat of awakening, my teacher Ajahn Chah called it taking the one seat in the middle of the whole world and opening the doors and windows. And your only instruction, he said, is to keep your senses open—your eyes, your ears, your heart open—and not get off your seat. The rest will all teach you. All that will come is your teacher. You don't need anything more than that.

So you meet with respect, with the doors open, with a spacious and kind heart, whatever wants to arise. And as you do, a profound healing starts to take place. You experience the physical pains in the body, or the conflict in your life, or the memories of guilt and grief and what I call the Freudian layer—your relation to your family. There's a reason they call it nuclear family, by the way, but we won't go there.

The dukkha, the suffering—along with the unbearable beauty of life, there's also an ocean of tears. And we all are part of that. We have the tears of the world, of environmental destruction and climate change and continuing warfare, all those things we carry in us. But we also carry the lineage of the sufferings of our families and communities, what has happened to us and to them.

But underneath the suffering that we carry and the Freudian layer, if you can sit with it and listen deeply, there comes a kind of healing. What feeling wants to be honored in you that you've run away from? The grief, the longing, the love, the loneliness, the creativity? What in your body wants to heal, to be touched with healing attention? What story wants to be let go of or forgiven? What comes that's true? What truth wants to be acknowledged? This is really the way it is. It's like this. What wants to be accepted in you?

When you can sit with this kind of open and caring attention—loving awareness, mindfulness—there will come in its season a sense of renewal and goodness and flowering. "Although the world is full of suffering," says Helen Keller, "it is also full of the overcoming of it." The suffering is not the end of the story. And there comes in you a sense of capacity and presence and renewal.

I remember this from being in the Cambodian refugee camps—these long rows of little bamboo huts that were about seven feet long and four feet wide for a family, with a little open door with a cloth hanging over it. In front of each hut there was a square, maybe one yard of earth where the path went into the door. That was their little plot, and then there was the next hut.

After a month or two in this dry, barren place, the UNHCR had made seeds available. And almost everybody took these little seeds for squash and beans and things. There was a big pit well at the end of this huge camp of 100,000 people. You'd go with your bucket and stand in the hot sun in a long line, walk all the way down, and get a bucket of water. There's this line of people, and they'd be watering the little plants in their garden. These were people who'd lost their villages, whose temples were burned, whose lives were saved out of a wreckage of genocide really, just horrors. And there they were, planting their seeds and pouring the water. There were the tendrils of the beans and the peas and the things that they planted growing over the doorway.

Because life, when we allow it, when we attend to it, when we water it with our loving awareness—it wants to renew itself in us.

In the 1990s, I started a rigorous six-year academic program in Boston that required me to work during the day, take classes at night, and do homework on weekends. I was exhausted. On my first summer off, I wanted to get far away from studies and work with my hands and get close to the earth. So I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me, and I decided to do it again the next summer.

But that year my father died, and shortly after, I drove from Boston to Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend. What was normally a six-hour trip took more than ten hours. By the time I arrived just before dusk, I was anxious and exhausted. My Amish hosts had delayed their dinner for me, and during the meal I tried to act natural, but I felt my grief and I was full of nerves.

My Amish host could clearly tell something was amiss, because at the end of dinner he said, "Come with me." I followed him to their backyard, which bordered an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gamboled about while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa.

I did the same. The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. The sky was peach at the bottom and deep blue higher up. Stars had begun to appear. And then out of the alfalfa rose fireflies—a few at first, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars, heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. I felt my anxiety leave me. And the farmer turned and said, "That's for you."

There's something that wants to renew itself in us, in you and in me. When we willingly take our seat—the seat of awakening—we bring to it also a kind of growing faith in our capacity to open. And it knows how to open. The body knows how to open. You don't have to pull the petals of the flower to get it open. Your grief knows how to open. It will come with its ocean of tears and stories and sorrows in the body and pain in the heart. Your longing, your love, your creative connection to life—all these know how to open. You can absolutely trust this.

And then you discover that what you most long for is already here. As Thoreau famously said, many men go fishing all their lives without realizing it's not fish they're after. But there's something about standing out in that stream with your fishing rod, or sitting on your cushion taking this one seat, where you stop and you listen to something so mysterious and magnificent.

This is from James Baldwin: "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word love here not merely in a personal sense, but as a state of being or a state of grace. Not the mistaken and even infantile sense of being made happy, but the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth and unconquerable love."

And so something really deep grows in you—what you long for—which is to be home in your own body and in the universe, to take this seat, to sense its vastness, to know that you are not just the small sense of self. You are not what's called the body of fear. You've encountered it, it's in you. But that's not who you are. There's some shift that opens from the small sense of self, the body of fear, and you recognize that you are connected with everything. Or as Nisargadatta, my teacher, said: wisdom says I am nothing and love says I am everything. Between these two my life flows.

If you want to do a little practice sometime while you're here, or even just to reflect on it, I'd like to offer this: look in the mirror and notice that you've aged. It droops, it sags, it loses its fur—or it sprouts other fur. It does. It's really quite remarkable. The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. It gets wrinkly and saggy. It's the animal of your body going through its changes.

But the strange thing—which we all know from experience—is that we don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? You can say, "Gosh, how did that happen?" It's a remarkable thing because in that moment, you recognize that it's the body that's aged. It was this infant, this little child, teenager, young person—and it goes through its arc of what human bodies do.

But in that moment of looking and saying, "Hmm, I don't feel older," it's because the loving awareness, the consciousness—you could call it the spirit of who you are—exists outside of time. You're not this body made out of Caesar salad and yams and oatmeal. You're just not oatmeal. That's simply not the truth of who you are. And you're not your thoughts, thank God. And you're not your feelings. You have to honor them as you honor this body. It's a magnificent, beautiful thing to have this human incarnation. But who you are was born into this body—its vastness and emptiness and timeless consciousness.

And this isn't something I want to convince you about. It's much more something to invite you to remember, to know.

"Try to be mindful," said Ajahn Chah, "and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of a Buddha."

"How nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember this capacity for awakening. You are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones. This capacity for freedom—it will bless you and your life and all you touch.

And it's so deeply needed in this world to have some who, instead of running away from the world, have really stopped and seen it—the beauty and the suffering, the glory and the difficulty—and found this seat in the midst of it all: a wise and peaceful heart.

So if you're having a hard time, perfect. Anybody have a completely easy day? Don't raise your hand. Everyone will be jealous, and we will be dubious. Because it's not how it starts, and it's not really what it means to be human. You get the whole thing.

It's truly an honor to be able to sit together as we do, to share this practice of awakening, freedom, and love. Because until you can let yourself really be present, you can't know the magnitude or the blessing fully—the blessing of love. And in a way, we also all want that.

From the poet Rilke: "In order for a thing to speak to you, you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists." Through your laborious and exclusive love—like each breath, the only one, the only phenomenon—now placed at the center of the universe. And in that incomparable place, in that moment on that day, it is attended by angels.

So we're learning something really magnificent and difficult and beautiful—tedious and boring, too. But Gandhi called it blessed monotony.

Thank you for your practice, for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 2

The Bodhisattva Leaves a Retreat

Jack Kornfield · 1h05

> *In this closing talk from a Spring Insight Meditation Retreat, Jack Kornfield addresses the profound challenge of transitioning from the silence and sensitivity cultivated in retreat back into the complexity of daily life. He introduces the bodhisattva ideal—the commitment to embody freedom while bringing awakening to all one touches—tracing it from the Buddha's own journey after his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.*
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> *Kornfield guides practitioners through an experiential paired meditation exploring the four brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity), inviting participants to gaze into another's eyes and perceive both their unique personhood and their timeless Buddha nature. This practice illuminates how loving awareness naturally arises when we attend deeply to another being, seeing both their secret beauty and their measure of sorrows.*
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> *The talk weaves together the Four Noble Truths with practical wisdom for engaging with a world marked by suffering, racism, and political turmoil. Kornfield emphasizes that awakening is not a journey from here to there, but from there to here—becoming intimate with all things. He encourages practitioners to discover and deliver their unique "cargo" or gift to the world, drawing on stories of Thich Nhất Hạnh, the Dalai Lama, and everyday moments of grace. The teaching concludes with the Buddha's instruction: "Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate."*

So here you are, you've been talking. Between the world of silence and the world of talking, do you have a preference? I see some nodding heads. What's your preference? Silence? Isn't that nice? I mean, they're nice people and everything. And how does it feel in your body after the days of silence to be talking? Hard? It's resonating a lot, isn't it?

Now we live in the sea of this out there, but here you got a bit quieter and still, and you've become more sensitive. We'll talk about it in the morning as you leave—that you have to respect this sensitivity over these next days. But I think more deeply, you have to respect that you're sensitive beings. We armor ourselves and we learn to navigate all of this. But in fact, we're also organisms that are tremendously sensitive and tender. And we've created a world where that's not so well supported, is it? You know, in our society.

So tonight I want to talk about the ideal of the bodhisattva. Bodhisattva is a compound word most of you have heard. Bodhi means awakening or free. And sattva means a being committed to liberation or awakening. The notion of the bodhisattva—the ideal of both embodying freedom and then bringing it to all you touch—is there from the very beginning in Buddhism, in every one of the schools, and from the earliest time. The Buddha himself was called the Bodhisattva for lifetime after lifetime of training and practice and developing these capacities of awakening.

After his awakening under the Bodhi tree, his bodhisattva activity is very simple. People say, well, is this passive? He sat, he had his deep revelation of wisdom and freedom. And then he stood up and he walked for forty-five years the dusty roads of India. Before he walked, before he stood up, it occurred to him: What should I do right now that this awakening is so clear? And with his mind so clear, he surveyed the world with what's called the eye of wisdom and compassion. He saw beings everywhere creating suffering out of ignorance and misunderstanding. And he knew that there was a way to teach them that they could live with greater happiness and freedom.

But as he saw the suffering that humans create, tears rolled down his cheeks, and when they touched the earth, they turned into the goddess Tara or Quan Yin, one of the bodhisattvas of compassion, as the myth goes. He saw the possibility in the midst of the suffering of the world for awakening. And then he got up and he said, let me walk through the roads of this world for as long as I live and invite others to this freedom and to this understanding.

So that's where you will be returning to—the dusty world of Fresno or Los Angeles or Albuquerque or wherever it happens to be. And it's not actually going to be that easy. First of all, we live in an addicted society where the best adjusted person is somebody who's not quite alive but just consuming and working all the time and not questioning too much. We're taught not to question.

And we live in a world, the human world, where there is dukkha, or suffering—the first noble truth. One of the Buddha's first teachings is that human incarnation involves suffering. Anybody not have that? Raise your hand, you can have your money back. And it's serious. It's loss and illness and aging. So there's that kind of suffering. And then there's the human-caused suffering of climate change that we have to deal with, and continuing racism and warfare.

Somebody was asking why we have groups for POC or white allies or white awareness groups and so forth. One of the dedications in our community now is especially around this, because there's so much visible pain around racism in our culture right now. And it's there in the political campaign.

The Buddhist teachings are a medicine for this. From the very beginning, the Buddha said that the Dharma gates welcome every single human being for their fundamental dignity, their beauty, their spirit—whatever your race or caste or creed or orientation or gender, the Dharma gates welcome you. He was really radical in that way, especially in that time.

But now we're in this culture that has racism as one of its wounds—maybe the core wound of our culture. A lot of the economic problems and disparity, and many other kinds of suffering, come from seeing people as other. And so it becomes really important to use our Dharma to awaken and see the dignity of every single being.

You'll be out there, and first of all, you'll see and hear in the conversation that racism—this is James Baldwin—he writes, "One of the reasons that people cling to their hate and prejudice so stubbornly, I believe, is that they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pains." And so if we can project it on the enemy du jour—whether it was the communists or the gays or the Muslims or the blacks or the immigrants or the Mexicans or whatever—it's like the insecurity. We are insecure. We're vulnerable. It's true as human beings. This is our lot. Things change. When we can't bear this, then we project it on others.

And then the politicians of the world—this is from H. L. Mencken, a great political commentator of a hundred years ago—he says, "The whole aim of politics is to frighten and menace the populace with an endless series of fearful hobgoblins, almost all of them unreal," simply as a way to gain power, to try to make you afraid in some way or other.

So I'm just giving you some little hints about what's out there. And for those who are interested in the presidential campaign, my advice is part of the time just turn off the news and turn on Mozart, please—or somebody else, Lady Gaga, anybody. You'll have enough information. It's just for information's sake to know that the race is now between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and that's been settled. Nobody else is in it. So we live in interesting times.

These energies that I'm talking about in different ways are out there. And so how do we deal with that? And more than that, how do we, as the Buddha did, walk through this dusty world with its enormous sufferings and its unbearable beauty? Which is what human incarnation gives us.

Now, what did we learn here that is important to carry and to take with us? One of the first things is that our states of mind, our spirit, the way we approach the world means almost everything.

Who is your enemy? Ask the Buddha. Mind is your enemy. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can hurt you more than your own mind untrained. You know this. Talk about being in trouble—the biggest trouble you can make is your own damn mind, right? And who is your friend? A trained and awakened mind and heart can carry you anywhere. Through the dusty world, the world of the ten thousand joys and sorrows.

What you've started to learn here is that there's a way to sit and walk and be in this human incarnation of its ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows with wisdom, with a loving awareness or mindfulness that sees the play of experience.

And you've learned to actually see deeply. I like to talk about the Vipassana facelift at the end of the retreat. I look at some of you and honestly, you look a lot younger. It's beautiful. Look in the mirror. Your eyes are brighter, your skin smoother. It might have been a tough retreat, but something happened to you. You can tell—you walk in the desert and in certain moments you just feel so much more open and connected. We all know this. It's like we're cleansed a bit and we can see deeply.

And you see deeply anyway at certain moments—when you listen to sacred music or enter a great cathedral, or there at the birth of a child, or that mystery when you're with someone as they die and that spirit leaves as silently as a falling star and something mysterious happens. Who are we? We have this life and then it disappears. Or making love, or sacred medicine—all kinds of ways that you touch something that's so much greater than the limited sense of self. Walking in the cathedral of the redwoods, and then that small sense of self opens up and you realize, as Wes talked about, it's not me, the separate self, but this is—I am life.

Alice Walker writes, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was. And it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything."

And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and ran all around the house. When it happens, you just can't miss it.

And so you get to see more deeply here the human lot that you were born into, with greater wisdom. And that deep seeing allows you to attend to the world and see what's called its secret beauty—the dignity of each person that's there.

Dante, back in the late 1300s, was standing on the edge of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, this marvelous medieval bridge. And he saw a young woman standing on the bridge—Beatrice—and he was so smitten by her beauty and her spirit, he was just swept away. Not just how she looked, but somehow how she touched him. And he got to know her a little bit. And then she died; she died in the plague. But she didn't die to him.

She became his muse in some way. And he then went and wrote one of the most magnificent poems and works of art, certainly in Western literature—the Divine Comedy, the Inferno and Paradiso, all of that extraordinary work. And it was the vision of Beatrice that carried him through all that.

So in the Second World War, toward the end of the war, when the Allies were going up the Italian peninsula with their tanks and bombs, and the Germans and Italian army were retreating, the Germans were blowing up all the bridges over the rivers so that the Allied forces couldn't use them and couldn't advance. But the German general was a literate man. And he was just north of Florence. And he contacted the main general of the Allied forces and said, "I don't want to blow up the Ponte Vecchio. But I need you to promise that if I don't blow it up, you won't use it for any military purposes." And the American general contacted him back, made radio contact, and made a promise that they wouldn't use the bridge—which held. The bridge wasn't blown up. Not one single American soldier or piece of equipment went across it. And it's still there.

The bridge was spared in this terrible, ruthless modern war because Beatrice stood on it. And Dante had a vision of beauty that changed everything for him. And that kind of vision—seeing the secret beauty of the world—is really what's offered to us in this practice.

So I want us to do a little practice now, instead of just talking to you. This is the practice side. See, you have your habits, and some people are already kind of putting one foot in the stirrup and getting in their meditation saddle. It's so interesting to watch, right?

This is going to be a paired meditation for about ten minutes or so. And what I want you to do is stay silent. I'd like to invite you to turn to someone near you and sit opposite them so that you can just face them kindly, with no words. And then we'll do a little guided meditation practice.

So settle yourself for a moment, and let yourself be ready now, in a silent way, to attend with this open-mindedness—to see deeply this other being. Take a deep breath or two. Relax. Release any tension that's present. And then, when you're ready, gaze into each other's eyes. And if you're introverted or shy, which is also fine, and you feel a little discomfort or the urge to laugh or look away, just note that embarrassment with patience and gentleness. And come back when you can to your partner's eyes.

For you may never have the opportunity to see this person, the uniqueness of them, in this way again.

And as you look into this person's eyes, let yourself see the beauty behind these eyes, the beautiful spirit that was born there, the original goodness, the capacity for love. Open your awareness to the gifts and strengths behind these eyes. Behind these eyes are unmeasured reserves of courage, intelligence, patience, wit, and wisdom—so many gifts born into this human being, some of which this person themselves may be unaware.

As you see their beautiful spirit that was born into them and carried to this day, and all the kindnesses they may have offered the world, and all the possibilities of this amazing being, sense the natural goodwill you have for them—how you would like them too to be free from fear and confusion, to be well. And know that what you are now experiencing is the great, natural loving-kindness.

As you look into these eyes, stay connected. Continue to look and take a deeper breath. Looking deeply, let go of the loving-kindness. Let yourself also become aware of the measure of pain that is there behind these eyes—the measure of sorrows accumulated in this life, as in all human lives, that you can only guess at. There are disappointments and losses, failures and loneliness, hurts beyond the telling.

Let yourself sense that pain, the hurts this person may have never told another human being. You cannot fix their pain, but you can be with it with a spirit of courage. As you let yourself simply be in the presence of their measure of sorrows, as you see them, you might see a frightened child. Imagine what your response would be—a hurt child, how you would reach out to comfort. Know that what you see now is giving birth to the great heart of compassion. It is essential for the healing of the world.

Take a deep breath as you continue to gaze. We are going through the four divine brahmaviharas, the awakened heart. Can you continue to look and let go of the compassion and the seeing of sorrows, and look even deeper?

As you look into these eyes again, you can also see the secret beauty and joy that is there—the child of the spirit that was born into this body. Imagine their happiest moments as a child, their best adventure, their laughing and running, their zest and joy. Let yourself sense the delight they take in collaborating with others, in playing and creating in the world—how they learned first to run and catch and play, and then read and grow, and bring this world alive with their joy. As you see in these eyes the child of the spirit born there, know that what you are now experiencing is mudita, the joy in another's joy, the delight in the joy of another. The true nature.

And finally, take one more deep breath, staying connected with these eyes. Let your awareness drop deep, like a stone sinking below the level of words, to see that consciousness which underlies all life, the web of life you have both taken birth in. See the consciousness behind these eyes and the face before you as one who, at another time and place, has been young and old, awake and asleep, lost. Who has been your son or daughter, your mother or father, your friend, your enemy, your student, your teacher.

Who are you really? Look deeply now—not the body, not the thoughts or feelings, not conditioning. Let yourself see the timeless spirit. And who is it that is seeing? Is this who I am? The timeless awareness, mystery, pure knowing. Rest in it. Trust it. It is your home.

Let your eyes close for a moment. Just rest. And again, let them open. Acknowledge your partner and take literally just one minute to thank them in any way you wish.

Okay. It's been great this year. We'll talk. I'll see you soon. I hope to see you. Thank you.

Finish up. And if we had a lot more time, I'd just let you talk to one another in this way. I know this can be difficult at times when you feel shy or embarrassed. But also it can open something—to see the beauty of another being this way. I've had people raise their hand and say, "I was married to this woman or this man for twenty-nine years and we never looked at each other." Wow.

And you can begin to feel how natural loving-kindness and compassion and understanding are when you attend in this extremely simple way, when you bring your gaze to the mysterious being in front of you.

How was that? Kind of wild, isn't it?

So what do you learn when you do something like this? It really amplifies what we've learned in the practice—that there are two different dimensions you get to see. One is the timeless nature of consciousness itself, that spirit behind these eyes that's independent of their body or their history or their family or any of that. There's something so universal. The Buddha nature, the true nature in that being, so beautiful. And you also see their uniqueness—their particular face and eyes and hair color and history. All of that sometimes flashes, and you see things about them by looking so deeply.

And so there's this paradox in which you have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number, basically. You don't separate these, but you hold this mystery of human life with its uniqueness and its universal and timeless truth. And it's not one or the other. If you only see the universal, then you're not a very good driver—

they'll lock you up basically. You're not attending to what's here. On the other hand, if you're just a materialist and only focused on what's here and you don't see the spirit behind it, you're also lost.

So what you saw was a kind of wedding.

Trudy and I had this experience. I had the opportunity to visit Thich Nhat Hanh, who's had this major stroke. He was in San Francisco. We went together on the last day, especially the last day before he went back to France. He's eighty-nine. And he can't talk. He can raise one hand. With speech therapy, a few words he can now say.

We went early in the morning to sit with him before he was to fly back to France. After the sitting—six-thirty, we went and we all sat together. They rang the bell and helped him walk in. He was in a wheelchair and they sort of sat him up. And he looked around, and Trudy actually had the most beautiful description of what it was. Because there's one way he saw each of us. I've known him for many years. He saw the small group of people that were there and kind of bowed to us. That was the particular.

But as Trudy noted, the other eye was looking into infinity. It was like there were these two different eyes—one that was the most beautiful personal recognition, and the other, him on the verge of death, really, at the end of life, seeing, which he's always seen, something that's timeless.

And that's what you just got to see in some way—the beauty of this person and the timelessness of it. And you also get to see that the heart is big enough to hold the ten thousand joys and sorrows.

You can see the measure of tears and the suffering, which is not a mistake. It's part of human existence. You get to see that, and that seeing brings awake in you the great heart of compassion. And that's what you've been learning here as you sit.

Enlightenment—it's not a word I use so much. I like the word awakening better. I think it's a better translation. Enlightenment was a Victorian translation that has a lot of overlays of misunderstanding. Awakening, enlightenment, is not far away. You don't get from here to there, practice long enough and then travel to Burma and India and the Himalayas. It's not a journey from here to there. It's a journey from there to here.

As the poet Kabir says, "Are you looking for me? I'm in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours." If you're looking for something holy, all you have to do is turn around and gaze at the person beside you. And something starts to become clear.

I've looked at many of the different spiritual scenes in America because I'm in the industry, basically. The lamas and swamis and mamas and papas and whatever. Some are better and some aren't. Some have sila and virtue, and some forget about that part, which is pretty problematic. A lot of them say, "We have the best, fastest way. Tantra is the best way. Zen is the emptiest. Advaita is more non-dual than your practice." All that stuff. You see all that, right?

I haven't seen any place where it's faster than any place else. Because it's not going somewhere. And it's not about some state. You've had beautiful states here sometimes. Instead, it's about the growing capacity of the heart to be present and free in the midst of all the things that rise and pass. To become the one who knows. And that's not fixing yourself in some way. It's simply being present.

Did I have a good retreat, you might ask. What's a good retreat? Maybe you had a lot of suffering, maybe there was joy, maybe there was both, maybe you had it and you lost it, and then you lost it and had it again.

Go ahead, light your incense, ring your bells, call out to the gods. But watch out, for the gods will come and they will fire up the forge and put you on the anvil and beat you and beat you until they turn brass into pure gold. This is an Indian saying.

So you've had a tough retreat? Terrific. As I said, in Tibet they pray for suffering. May I have enough suffering to really open the heart of compassion. What is a bad retreat or a good retreat?

To awaken is to become—Zen Master Dogen used this beautiful phrase, as Trudy was talking about in his teachings—to awaken is to become intimate with all things. To become intimate with life. And so you become intimate with your measure of sorrows. You become intimate with your body, its pains, and then when it opens and there's bliss and joy, and then the trauma that you carry.

But you are not your trauma. You need to tend it, and sometimes there must be healing and forgiveness. But you don't want to be too loyal to your suffering. How did Nelson Mandela walk out of that prison after twenty-seven years on Robben Island with so much magnanimity and graciousness and forgiveness and compassion? He had to work it in the prison—when you read his autobiography, you see this. But they can put your body in prison. No one can imprison your spirit.

Not your parents, not the police. Nobody can do that to you.

And so the practice is to see the dignity in each being you meet and to find it in yourself.

A woman who works as a Buddhist chaplain in a hospital likes to go around twice a year, and as she moves through the hospital, she blesses people's hands. She blesses the hands of the surgeons and the nurses. Then she goes down to the basement and finds the people who are cleaning the toilets, serving the food, washing the pots, and she makes sure their hands get blessed too. Last year one of them said to her, "This is the most meaningful thing that happens all year." Some of these people are not valued as they should be. She goes around and finds them and blesses their hands, and they're often startled and deeply touched—as is she.

It's so simple, that kind of intimacy of bringing your attention and your care. And yet when you do, your life changes, and the life of those around you begins to change, because you've learned this presence and a certain kind of fearlessness—the ability to gaze at the measure of sorrow and not turn away from it. As James Baldwin says, not to project it on somebody else, but to feel your own vulnerability and your own tears, and to see that in another and say, "Yes, I've sat under my tree of enlightenment. And I know that this is what makes up life."

There comes a fearlessness and an understanding—I guess you could call it wisdom.

I have this story from a woman who was working, as I have at times in the past, in Palestine and Israel with different peace groups. I found it very moving because one of the things that happens is you only get the bad news from there. Anybody throws a bomb, a suicide bomb, teenagers being shot, all the terrible things that happen—that makes the news. But not the hundreds of groups doing real work: the former combatants for peace, the bereaved mothers—Palestinian, Israeli, Lebanese—the teenagers making connections across the lines. Really amazing, beautiful things.

Anyway, this group was working in Palestine—Israelis, Americans, and Palestinians together. They got permits to come into Israel for a special gathering. They brought one Palestinian man with them who was going to be a speaker, a beautiful guy who'd gone through a lot of difficulty. When they got to the checkpoint, the soldier—a woman in uniform—checked everyone, then saw the man and said, "Give me your ID. Get off this bus. You can't cross here. This isn't a crossing for Palestinians. You have to go back that way." The other crossing point was an hour and a half away. If he could even get a taxi, very expensive, maybe he'd get there, maybe not, and an hour and a half back. He would miss the meeting. He was, of course, very disappointed.

The woman accompanying him wrote about what happened next. She said, "I looked at the soldier and I saw, under the uniform, a beautiful woman. Under her military hat I saw her long black hair tied in a ponytail behind her. Repeatedly, with sharpness, she

said no. But I watched her hair, and it was swishing back and forth. She moved one way and her hair moved differently. I got confused by her presence because she was saying no, but something else was going on.

"I tried not to judge her. I just looked at her and saw this woman, and I said, 'This is really important. It's peace work. Is there any way you can find to help us? We really need him there. I can see that you want to help.'

"She looked at me and moved her gun aside a little, and her keys, and she said, 'Well, see that gate over there? If he crosses it quickly and goes calmly to that other gate, in five minutes I can meet him as a guard and let him through.'

"I saw this opening and I wanted to honor it. And there it was, and she went through with it.

"I became curious about this woman—this dark, slender, young woman in front of me, young enough to be my daughter. I wanted to ask her about her hair. What's the story? I was convinced her hair had its own language.

"And I did ask, and she said, 'It is a reminder that I'm first and foremost a woman. I'm born into life to love. I tend to forget this under the uniform. I've forgotten how to smile. I've seen so much suffering. And then my hair slaps my face. It blows and reminds me I'm a woman. No one can bury this fact under any kind of uniform. And when I'm out of here, I will work for peace like you.'

"And now we were speaking the same language, her and her hair."

There's something about our willingness to see the beauty in another.

As Nelson Mandela said, it never hurts to see the good in someone—they often act the better because of it.

So you've learned that your heart is big enough to hold all the joys and sorrows, to see both the universal and the personal, to bring a kind of intimacy of attention that awakens beauty and presence and understanding. That intimacy is not just with another person; it's also with yourself.

Of course, you've been intimate with yourself here. You know the socks of the people near you and such things. But you've also watched your own mind, your own heart, as it opens and as it closes. You think, "Oh, I should always have a big open heart. I should just love all the time." That's the ideal, right? "Oh God, I'm just going to love everything."

But you have to breathe. And it turns out the heart also opens and closes. The lungs breathe, and the cerebrospinal fluid breathes, and the tides move to the moon, and the stock market changes. Menstrual cycles. It turns out the heart opens and closes. You can't force it open and simply be loving on demand. You've sat here and watched the heart open and close. You've watched the mind open and close. Everything that's conditioned is impermanent.

And then underneath all that, as you get quiet and allow your own uniqueness to be met with loving awareness, you begin to sense—like the Buddha getting up from his seat—that it's time to take your understanding into the world. In Zen they say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is—the garden of the world.

So you quiet the mind and open the heart. You remember who you are. And then you go and give your gift to the world. It might be as an artist, or a conscious businessperson, or a parent, or a person working for social justice, or someone working in the crazy, insane criminal justice system, or a person planting trees. You each have a cargo to deliver.

That's what my African friend, a shaman, says. It's a beautiful West African metaphor: we're all born with a cargo, and the only thing that matters in your life as you awaken is that you deliver your cargo.

You say, "Well, what the hell is my cargo?"

Puanani Burgess, who is a Hawaiian teacher, says: "I try to work in the schools in a process called Building the Beloved Community. The exercise I work with these kids involves first telling three stories. Story number one: tell us all your names. The second is the story of your community. And the third story I ask is: tell us your gift."

"So one time I did this process in our local high school. We went around the circle and got to this young man, Kele. He told the story of his names well and the story of his community well. But when it came time to tell the story of his gift, he asked, 'What, miss? What kind of gift you think I get, eh? I stay in this special ed class and I get a hard time reading, and I can't do math. Why you make me shame for? Asked me that kind of question, what kind of gift I have. If I had gift, you think I'd be here?'"

"Kele just shut down and shut up, and I felt really shamed. In all my years of teaching, I've never done that. I've never shamed a student."

"Two weeks later, I'm in our grocery store and I see him down one of those aisles. I see his back, and I'm going down there with my cart, and I think, 'Nope, I'm not going there.' It was too painful. So I start to back up, trying to get away from him. And then he turns around and sees me and throws his arms open and runs toward me. 'Auntie, auntie! I've been thinking about you! Two weeks I've been thinking—what my gift, what my gift?'"

"I say, 'Okay, brother, what's your gift?'"

"He says, 'You know, I've been thinking. I cannot do that math stuff and I cannot read so good. But auntie, when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish. And the fish, he come every time. Every time I put food on my family table. Every time. And sometimes when I stay in the ocean and the shark, he come, and he look at me, and I look at him, and I tell him: Uncle, I'm not going to take plenty fish. I just going to take one, two fish, just for my family. All the rest I leave for you. And so the shark, he say, Oh, you cool, brother.'"

And I tell the shark, uncle, you cool. And the shark, he go his way and I go my way.

And I look at this boy, Kali, and I know what a genius he is. And I mean it. But in our society, the way the schools are run, he's rubbish. He's destroyed, not appreciated.

So when I talk to his teacher and the principal, I ask them, what would his life be if this curriculum were gift-based? What if we were able to see the gift in each of our children and taught around that gift? What would happen to us as a society if we saw the gift in every human being?

And so you become intimate with yourself and you listen for what your gift is and what your cargo is to deliver. And it's never too late, you know. I mean, here Trudy and I, we fell in love, we're seventy, right? And we're having a great time. It's never too late. As someone said the other night—whether it was George or Noah or Trudy herself—even people at the end of their life, sometimes there's a moment when they see in a new way. But you don't have to wait to be wise.

It also means that you don't want to be too idealistic about it, thinking you're supposed to be some special way. When I read Shambhala Sun or Tricycle, I wonder who these people are. They admit to an occasional random thought, but it's clear they're all becoming enlightened, or at least able to dwell in clear and empty space. Or those Yoga Journal people, where everyone is thin, composed, and bends in all directions. Or Fortune, where everyone's a millionaire, a captain of success.

So where, I ask, is the magazine for failure? For thirty years of falling and recalling, oh yes, be here now again. For the continual recovering from the storms. For the endless repairing of the ship and the broken sails. For this thick and heavy middle-aged body, barely bending. For the immense gratitude in meeting once again next week's payroll, next month's rent.

It's not about—I said it in the first talk—it's not really about perfecting yourself, but perfecting your love. That's what matters in this life. And love, or loving awareness, which we've been teaching, becomes the gateway to freedom. If the freedom doesn't have love, or the love doesn't deepen into a sense of openness, something's missing.

And it's very simple. What we have learned here is not only to sit and walk in the midst of the joys and sorrows—we've seen the First Noble Truth. Anybody not seen dukkha? Mara not come to any of you? So we've seen that that's part of our life.

But that's the first noble truth. We've also seen the second noble truth: the cause of our suffering and the suffering of the world is greed and hatred and fear and reactivity and judgment. You see all those suffering forms of mind.

And then you see the third noble truth, which is there's an end to that suffering. There's a balance of peacefulness, a joyful heart, a loving awareness. Becoming the one who knows, there's a witnessing of it that says, yes, this too, and this too, and this too—with graciousness and compassion. And you start to realize that your suffering is not the end of the story. It's just the beginning of the story.

Now people have asked, in these previous question periods, what about the need for ambition or anger? Where do you get your power from if you're just this nice loving person? Because the world is tough out there and it's full of both conflict and greed and hatred and ignorance. What do you do? How do you move through the world as a bodhisattva?

Wes interviewed Gary Snyder, one of our great Pulitzer Prize-winning poets, a few years ago. Gary's in his eighties. He was one of the original visionaries for an ecological consciousness in this country.

50 years ago, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Earth Household*—an amazing environmentalist. And Wes said, "Gary, you see global warming, loss of species, rising oceans, environmental disasters. What advice do you have for us?"

And he looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty."

Amazing thing—don't feel guilty. Because if you try to save it out of guilt, or anger, or fear, those are the very forces that have made the problem: the anger and the fear and the guilt. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it.

And the only force that can actually meet aggression and ambition, that can possibly match it, is the force of love. It's Martin Luther King saying after the church was bombed, "We will meet your physical force with soul force," using Gandhi's words. It's the power that makes mothers lift cars off their children.

And it's the quality that allows the Dalai Lama, whose country has been taken over by the communist army, whose temples burned, so much lost, to still have a joyful spirit. He said, "They've taken so much from me. They've taken the temple and the land. Why should I let them take my happiness as well?"

I think people go to see him by the tens of thousands not so much for those Tibetan teachings—half of which are incomprehensible anyway. They're cool, but you don't quite know what he means. They go to hear him laugh, to witness that somebody could carry this much suffering and be so joyful.

Or you look at somebody like Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Prize in Kenya. She planted trees. She was thrown in prison for her activist work. But she got out of prison and gathered her people, and she ended up planting trees until they planted 51 million trees. One tree at a time. Tremendous courage. And she just didn't give up. She was quite positive: "If they throw me in prison and I come out, I'll plant some more trees on government land. I don't care where the land is. We're just going to plant trees." And she began to change the country.

So love gives a different kind of courage and a different kind of power—and it's yours.

And then this third noble truth: yes, there's suffering in the world. And remember where we started—who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you as much as your own mind untrained. And who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can bless you and support you more than your own mind, not your most beloved friends or parents—your own mind.

And so you begin to realize that amidst all of this life that we experience—like the Dalai Lama or Wangari or whoever—there also is joy. The instructions from the Buddha are this:

Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate.

This is instructions in the hatred, political season, injustice. Live in joy and in love even among those who hate. Live in joy and health even among the afflicted. Live in joy and peace even among the troubled. You become the one who carries the peace. Look within, be still, free from fear and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way.

These are instructions.

And so we could be loyal to our suffering, but that's not the end of what we're doing. Len Bergantino, a well-known psychologist, writes about a series of frustrating therapy sessions with a patient who was disconnected, detached, or else trying to please him all the time. "The feeling I had on this particular day was I just didn't want to say one more word to him about anything. So to his surprise, I took out my mandolin and in the most loving, beautiful way I could, I played 'Come Back to Sorrento.' He broke down in tears and cried for the last 40 minutes of the session, saying only, 'Bergantino, you sure earned your money today.'"

And I thought, to think, I wasted all these years talking to people! In good therapy, yes, there are skillful means, but a lot of it is just that you love people, that you really see who they are and you love them. You see their beauty, their dignity, you see their measure of difficulty, and you love them through all this.

So when we talk about letting go, there's a confusion—non-attachment, I'm going to be detached from the world. It's not that.

Detachment means I don't care. That's called indifference. Instead of grasping, what arises is love, commitment, dedication—whether in your relationships or in your practice. If you don't have dedication, you can't meditate. You'll simply run out of the hall the first time it gets unpleasant. If you don't have commitment, you can't do it. If you don't have that in a love relationship, how can it continue?

So it's not about attachment and needing things to be a certain way, but rather to love this other person with dedication and commitment and care. And that's part of what Gary Snyder was talking about. If you want to save the world, save it because you love it—out of your dedication and care and commitment.

"Give me everything mangled and bruised," writes Dina Metzger, "and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

Or Pablo Neruda, who writes, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring."

There's something in life that wants to renew itself. And you've come here to renew yourself and to learn an equanimity in the midst of all things. To remember that joy is possible. And that it's possible for you.

Even if you're feeling depressed today. Even if the retreat is ending and you're thinking, "I have to go back. I have troubles." Yes, that's okay. Depression is like this. Worry is like this. But who you are—you could see it in the eyes—is so much bigger.

And then you go back and you carry this. There's a piece from Laurie Chapman: "I like nothing more in this world than just listening, sitting on my ass, being happy, doing nothing. And it's not my fault that I have this attitude, because I happen to have an amazingly comfortable ass. It may not look like much, but if you could sit on this baby for two minutes, you'd realize that getting up off this ass would be a crime against nature."

So when you go home and practice, the point isn't to suffer. The point is actually to find some way to sit that reminds you that you can be present under your tree of enlightenment with the joys and sorrows of the world. And then you get up from your seat, as the Buddha did, and walk the dusty roads for those years. You get up from that seat and you bring your blessings to what you touch. And the world needs it.

Isn't the silence sweet?

It will help regulate you. And you've learned so many important things this week. Now it's a beautiful time to stay with it and not abandon the practice that you have.

We have teachings in the morning for you about going back—daily sitting, community, sangha—things like that, that will be very helpful as well.

But right now, enough words. Let's return to silence.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 3

Tending Yourself, Tending the World

Jack Kornfield · 1h04

> *In this heartfelt teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together stories of ordinary kindness and extraordinary courage to illuminate how we might tend to both our inner lives and the suffering of the world. Beginning with a moving account of a train conductor's compassion, he connects personal acts of care to the larger work of social transformation, drawing on examples from the abolition of slavery to Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama's remarkable capacity for joy amid hardship.*
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> *Kornfield addresses the challenge of engaging with politics and social suffering without being consumed by fear or reactivity. He shares the Buddha's teachings to kings on creating a flourishing society—honoring elders, caring for the vulnerable, tending the natural world, and cultivating personal mindfulness. The talk emphasizes that these are not mere ideals but trainable capacities, supported by modern neuroscience research on compassion and mindfulness practices.*
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> *The teaching explores how equanimity allows us to hold life's inevitable changes—joy and sorrow, gain and loss—with a steady heart. Through John Muir's exhilarating account of riding a treetop in a storm and the Amish community's radical forgiveness after tragedy, Kornfield illustrates that we can remain centered amid life's turbulence. He concludes with the Buddha's instruction to incline the mind toward compassion, truth, and wisdom, reminding us that each person's unique contribution to healing the world has never been offered before.*

So welcome back from the break.

When you come and listen to teachings, there's no quiz at the end and no grades. And you don't even have to remember anything. Rather, the invitation is to make the listening its own kind of meditation—not in some weird formal way, you're weird enough without adding to it—but rather to listen and notice if anything resonates in you as true. And if it does, if it reminds your heart or your spirit that this is something that matters, then there's some kind of moment of shared understanding that you can take with you.

Because you already have the wisdom of the ages within you. And of course people hear that and think it's a kind of nice platitude. Unfortunately, it's true. But the other unfortunate thing is that we often don't take the time to really listen to our hearts and

listen to what is most important to us, because we all get caught up in the thousand things of the world. So to meditate in some way is an invitation to come back and listen more deeply.

I was thinking what I might say tonight, especially given that it's the first presidential debate—or whatever you call it, bread and circus in Rome—and I want to talk about tending ourselves and tending the world. We'll see if it's helpful or useful or makes sense to you.

I'll start with a story from the British writer Bernard Hare. This happened a couple of decades ago. He was then a young student living on very little money in London.

"The police called at my student hovel in the early evening, but I didn't answer as I thought they'd come to evict me. I hadn't paid my rent in a couple of months. But then I got to thinking my mom hadn't been too good, and what if it was something about her? We had no phone in the hovel and mobiles hadn't been invented yet, so I had to nip down to the phone box. Rang home to Leeds to find my mother was in the hospital and not expected to survive the night. 'Get home, son,' my father said.

"I got to the railway station to find I'd missed the last train. That train was going as far as Peterborough, but I would miss the connecting Leeds train by twenty minutes. I bought a ticket and got on. I was a struggling student, didn't have the money for a taxi the whole way, but I had a screwdriver in my pocket and a bunch of skeleton keys. I was so desperate to get back to my mom, I planned to nick a car in Peterborough or hitchhike or steal some money or something. I knew from my dad's voice that she might die.

"'Tickets, please,' I heard. I fumbled for my ticket, gave it to the guard. He stamped it and stood there looking at me. I'd been crying, had red eyes.

"'You okay?' he said.

"'Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be? What's it got to do with you in any case?'

"'You look awful,' he said. 'Anything I can do?'

"'Get lost. Mind your own business,' I said. 'That'd be a big help.' I wasn't in the mood for talking. He was only a little bloke. He must have read the danger signal in my body language and tone of voice, but he sat down anyway.

"'If there's a problem, I'm here to help. That's what I'm paid for.'

"I was a big bloke in my prime, so I thought for a second about physically sending him on his way, but it somehow didn't seem right. He wasn't really doing much wrong, and I was going through all the stages of grief at once—denial, anger, guilt, withdrawal, fear, everything but acceptance. I was a cauldron of emotion, and he was in my line of fire. The only thing I could think of to get rid of him was to tell my story.

"'Look, my mom's in the hospital dying. She won't survive the night. I'm going to miss the connection to Leeds at Peterborough. I'm not sure how I'm even going to get home. It's tonight or never. I won't get another chance, so I'm a bit upset. Don't feel like talking, okay? Be grateful if you leave me alone.'

"'Okay,' he said. 'Sorry to hear, son.'"

I'll leave you alone then. Hope you make it home in time." And he wandered down the carriage, taking tickets.

I looked out the window. Ten minutes later, he was back by the side of my table. *Oh no*, I thought, *here we go again*. He touched my arm.

"Listen, when we get to Peterborough, shoot straight over to Platform 1 as quick as you like. The Leeds train will be there."

I looked at him, confused. "Come again?" I said. "What do you mean, is it late or something?"

He said, "No, it isn't late. I just radioed Peterborough. They're going to hold the train for you. As soon as you get on, it goes. Everyone will be complaining about how late it is, but let's not worry about that. You get home—that's the main thing. Good luck and God bless."

And then he was off down the train taking tickets. "Tickets, please. More tickets."

And I suddenly realized what a top class, full-fledged ass I was. Some of us have had that experience in our own lives. I chased him down the train. I wanted to give him all the money from my wallet, my driver's license, my keys, name my firstborn child—but I knew he'd be offended. I caught up and grabbed his arm.

"It's okay," he said. He had a warm smile and real compassion in his eyes. He was a good man for its own sake.

"I wish I had some way to thank you."

"Not a problem," he said. "If you need to thank me, the next time you see someone in trouble, you help them out. That will pay me back amply. Tell them to pay you back the same way, and soon the world will be a better place."

I was at my mother's side when she died in the early hours of the morning. Even now I can't think of her without remembering the conductor on that late-night train, and to this day I won't hear a bad word said about British Rail.

My meeting with the conductor changed me from a selfish, potentially violent hedonist into a decent human being—but it did take a little time. I've paid him back a thousand times since then. I tell the younger people that I now work with in juvenile hall and so forth. And I'll keep on doing it till the day I die. 'You don't owe me nothing,' I say to these young people. 'And if you think you do, I'll give you the same advice the conductor gave me. Just pass it down the line.'"

So—an opening story about a personal moment of kindness and connection. And of course it is personal, but it's more than personal.

Yesterday I met a couple of people who had just flown back from the celebration and the opening of the new African American Museum in Washington, D.C., which from all accounts that I've read is absolutely magnificent. They were standing there telling me about it—they'd been involved in the building and support for it—and they were weeping as they talked. They said it is filled with such amazing art and literature and the sense of beloved community, but also the artifacts of tragedy and pain: Emmett Till's coffin, Ku Klux Klan outfits that have blood on them, pictures of lynchings—all those kinds of things—but also uplift and magnificence of the art and the literature and the things that were created in pride.

And I thought about the story of one of my favorite reads of these last decades, a book called *Bury the Chains* by Adam Hochschild. He describes a group of a dozen folks who met in a tea shop or a printer shop in England in the 1780s and '90s, when slavery was still the major economic engine of the British Empire—that and sugar in the Caribbean and Latin America. Sugar was the oil of the time, and that was where all the money was coming from.

They met—some of them were Quakers, some weren't—and the head of this was a man named Thomas Clarkson, who ended up riding on horseback thirty thousand miles around England, bringing some ex-slaves who were well-spoken and articulate about the terrors of the Middle Passage, about what slavery actually was like, into the

living rooms of English people around the country. After thirty years, this small group of people, which grew into a movement, were able to effect in the British Parliament the law that outlawed slavery in the British Empire. Starting with twelve people.

And the Quakers who worked a lot with Thomas Clarkson—they wouldn't take their hats off for the king. "We only take our hats off for God."

But when Thomas Clarkson died, all the Quakers in England took their hats off.

So there is the momentary tending of another person on a train, of someone in trouble. And there's the tending of the injustice and the justice that's needed in the world.

And you might have hoped you were coming here tonight to escape from politics. Veronica Shoffstall, the poet, has written a charm for you called "A Charm Against the Language of Politics":

After you've compared the candidates' slippery platforms, say over and over the names of things, the clean nouns. Weeping birch, tanager, damask rose. Read field guides, atlases, gravestones. At the store, bless each apple by kind: Macintosh, winesap, delicious, Jonathan. Enunciate the vegetables and herbs: okra, cilantro, calendula. After a speech on compromising the environment, recite the tough, silky structure of webs: tropical stick, ladder web, mesh web, filmy dome, funnel web. Chant the spiders: comb-footed, round-headed, garden cross, feather-legged, black-faced. Remember that most short verbs are ethical: hatch, grow, spin, trap, eat. Dig deep, pronounce clearly, pull the words in over your head, and hole up until it's time to hatch.

But you really can't escape politics any more than you can escape death or taxes. You'll see—it's coming. Because underneath, in human incarnation, there is suffering. And there's also our care for one another. Both are true.

When we look at the political world, there are so many lenses we can use. One of them is that it's a way to tend to people's fears and desires and suffering. How do we tend to our suffering?

I just got a book called *I Wish My Teacher Knew*, filled with handwritten letters, mostly by second and third graders:

I wish my teacher knew that I don't have pencils at home to do my homework.

I wish my teacher knew that my mom doesn't sign my reading log because she can't read.

I wish my teacher knew that after my mom got diagnosed with cancer, I've been without a home three different times this year.

I wish my teacher knew that my dad works two jobs and I don't see him much.

I wish my teacher knew that I get worried when my little brother gets scared and wakes me up every night.

I wish my teacher knew that I love animals and I would do anything for my animals. I would love to work at the SPCA so I could help animals get adopted.

I wish my teacher knew that I'm smarter than she thinks.

You hear the spirit of these little kids. And you also know—I remember teaching at an education conference—yes, it's great to teach STEM: science and technology and engineering and math. But you can't learn math when your parents are in the middle of a terrible divorce, when there isn't money to pay the rent, when you're worried about the health of somebody in your family and there are no resources.

Part of what politics speaks to is really what we have to tend to as human beings: the suffering that each person carries. No one in this room is exempt from it. And the care that's there in our hearts. Because you hear those stories and you think about that child, you think about the teachers in that child's classroom, and what it means not just to see the papers that are submitted, but also somehow to see both the tears and the tender heart and the possibility in that human being.

Now, mostly politics is driven by fear. H.L. Mencken, who was a great political commentator, said a hundred years ago that the whole aim of politics is to create a continual state of alarm—to frighten and menace the populace with an endless series of hobgoblins, almost all unreal, as a way to gain power. That's one assessment of politics.

Another way to understand it is that politics is ritualized warfare. In the old days, the Republicans and the Democrats—and maybe the Libertarians or Greens would chime in, the smaller armies—would get in their tanks or on their horses and pull their knights out and see who gets the power and who gets to run the country. That's how it worked for a very long time among human beings.

Even though it is painful to watch at times, our political system, and in certain ways still quite problematic, at least it's done as a ritual kind of warfare. It is warfare, and you can see people approaching it as a battle. But it's not literally enacted.

So then when you see what happens and how messy it is, it's not so surprising. Because politics has become our way of solving the question of who gets the power, who makes the decisions for us in government. And there's a lot of conflict in it.

Now the sad thing is that, because of what Megan said, politics is often driven by fear. And we end up forging bonds of hatred rather than bonds of love. James Baldwin writes, "I believe one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and prejudice so stubbornly is they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

And so we project our pain or our fear or insecurity—because we are insecure. Anybody in this room not insecure? Come on. As Rilke the poet said, ultimately it's upon our vulnerability that we depend. Because we're vulnerable to the people who are driving the other way on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, and somebody could just turn their wheel and crash into us in a moment. We're vulnerable to the air that we breathe and the Fukushima nuclear reactor and how many particles of cesium or whatever are in our air or water. We're vulnerable to one another. Human life is tender and vulnerable as well as being robust. This is a reality for us.

And so instead of understanding that the human lot is also insecure—that security is a superstition—we project it on the communists. They're our enemy, the enemy du jour. Or the Mexicans, or the immigrants, or the gays, or the Muslims—whatever the enemy du jour. They're the ones we have to be afraid of. And if they weren't there, then everything would be hunky-dory. That kind of whipping up of fear as a way to solve our problems doesn't lead to much happiness for us.

But it turns out that there are other ways to meet insecurity, which is partly why we meditate. From Martin Luther King: "Now there's a final reason that I say love your enemies. It's this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there's a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep loving them and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they'll react in many ways in the beginning. They'll react with guilt feelings and sometimes they'll just hate you more at that time. But you just keep loving them and by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It's redemptive. There's something about love that builds up and is creative, and there's something about hate that tears down and is destructive."

When I was at the first Buddhist White House leadership gathering last year and gave a teaching to sum up what we were doing, there were all these beautiful, wise teachings that the Buddha had given to kings and ministers of his age, where he said: If you want to have a wise society, a healthy society, then answer these questions. Do the members of that community meet regularly in harmony, discuss things in harmony,

and depart in harmony? If so, they will prosper and not decline. Do they follow and honor the wisdom of past elders? They will prosper and not decline if they do. Do they tend and care for the natural world around them, the environment? Do they care for women and children and the most vulnerable among them? When they meet, do they treat all community members with respect and dignity? If so, they will prosper and not decline. And do they cultivate their own personal mindfulness and loving-kindness? So then they can be expected to prosper and not decline.

These are ancient teachings. And you hear them and they resonate. They're beautiful. But here's the interesting part: they're not really a big surprise. We kind of know this, right? But what I was able to say after talking about this and many other things at the White House is that these are not just ideals. The best news is that there are ways to develop them for human beings. All the ten thousand studies and papers in modern neuroscience in the last couple of decades on compassion practice and mindfulness training show that through the power of our attention, through the cultivation of compassion in a systematic way, of forgiveness, of loving-kindness, mindfulness of body and emotions—whether it's in little kids or grown-ups, whether it's in medical settings or business or education—these trainings rewire us. They actually give us the tools to learn how to be in the presence of conflict and difficulty and fear in a centered and kind way.

So the beautiful news is not just that these are great ideals, which they are, kind of universal across wise cultures, but that you as a human being have the capacity to grow and develop in these just as surely as you could plant a seed in a garden and water it and tend it and let the sunlight and all the nourishment of that, whatever you put to amend the soil, and beautiful things will grow. It turns out to be true for the human heart.

Now, what does the Dharma—the teachings traditionally of Buddhist psychology and the kind of practices that we do—actually have to contribute to all of this? Well, first of all, underlying it is the deep wisdom that what we need in the world, especially at this time, is not more technological advance, although that's marvelous.

Nanotechnology, biotechnology, greater computers, the worldwide web, space technology—all of this is very cool, astonishing actually. But as one of the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, we are a nation of nuclear giants and ethical infants. The outer development of humanity now has to be matched by inner development—by the cultivation of understanding interdependence, by developing the capacity to attend and listen, by the growth of compassion and all these qualities.

The meaning of the word *Dharma*, which means truth, which means the teachings, has many dimensions. My teacher Ajahn Chah said Dharma means the heart. That was his translation. And it means that when we approach the world through the Dharma heart, we live not with fear but with trust. It doesn't mean that fear doesn't arise—it does—but there's a deeper sense of trust underneath it. As Nelson Mandela said, coming out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island Prison, "It never hurts to see the good in someone. They often act the better because of it." And Mother Teresa's words were, "If we have no peace, it is because we've forgotten that we belong to each other, that we're family."

So the first thing that the Dharma teaches us is how to quiet the mind and open the heart and begin to listen more deeply—to connect with ourselves, to connect with our deepest values, and to connect with one another. Without something like this, we can flail around like a boat without a rudder. Everything that comes, whether good or bad, knocks us around each day. But as you learn to practice, as you undertake this training of presence and centeredness, of loving awareness, as the Tao Te Ching asks: "Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself? Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate in action and thought, you reconcile with all being."

There is something offered to us in these practices, in the contemplative dimension of humanity found across the world, in so many traditions that remind us there is a different way to live. When Mahatma Gandhi took one day a week in silence, he was doing so in the middle of deconstructing the entire British Empire. There were huge demonstrations and marches with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people in India—battles and all of this. And Gandhiji would say, "Well, Thursday's my day off. I have to be quiet that day." They would say, "But we need you." And he would reply, "You may need me, but I need to listen to something deeper and bigger." He would get quiet for that day every week and listen—like a Sabbath that we all need—to what he could do that was the purest, the most genuinely helpful, the most honorable with his life. What a beautiful set of questions to ask ourselves.

In the Dhammapada, the ancient verses from the Buddha's time: "Meditate. Live purely. Be quiet. Do your work with mastery. Like the moon, come out from behind the clouds. The one who awakens shines with the radiance of spirit." Come out and shine like the moon. But first, quiet yourself. Quiet the mind. Tend the heart. Come back to yourself. Let what is beautiful in you—what is beautiful in each one of you—have space to be heard and listened to, to blossom and grow.

Because who you are, in the end, is spirit, consciousness. There are all kinds of words for it—loving awareness. How did you get into that human body? You don't even remember very well, do you? Your parents did something, but whatever. They did a lot of things, but that one made you. Who you are is the spirit that was born into this body. And that's what will leave the body when you die. You think you're the kale and pasta that you eat? That's just not who you are. Vegetables and yogurt—that's not it. All right, well then maybe I'm my feelings and thoughts. I hope not, really. They change. You feel one thing and fifteen seconds later you feel something else. Feelings and thoughts are beautiful things, but they're not who you are. You are the witness to this. You are the consciousness that was born into this body. Who you are is loving awareness itself.

When my teacher went to talk to his great master more than fifty years ago, he said, "I've had all these great meditation experiences."

He found this great master. The master said, "Oh, you missed the point. Those are just like movies on the screen. The only question is, who's having those experiences? Who are you really?" Turn your attention back and become the one who knows—that was his expression—the witness to it all. Rest in loving awareness.

And then you'll see joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame. Anybody not have those? They keep changing. But there is a space of knowing that is always present and available, that can allow for and contain and hold all things with a tender heart—with compassion and love and awareness together.

A new book just came out a couple of days ago that friends of mine helped create, called *The Book of Joy*. It's a week-long dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu. They're old buddies. And the principal question in the book is: How can you two, who have suffered so much—Tutu under the apartheid regime and the kinds of suffering in South Africa that were enormous, all those deaths; and the Dalai Lama with the destruction of Tibetan culture, being in exile for more than fifty years—how can you two laugh? How can you two be joyful? What do you have to teach us about this?

As you read it, you just feel their spirit. I say very often, I think people go to hear the Dalai Lama not for all those great teachings that he does—those fantastic Tibetan teachings that no one quite understands but they seem really cool—or even the fact that he's this Nobel Peace laureate, this wise political figure. People go to hear him laugh. That he can sit up there after all that he's been through and giggle and laugh this deep belly laugh and love life.

So they're talking about their age—they're both in their eighties. "Yeah, I went to see a German specialist for my knee," the Dalai Lama said. "He found my physical condition pretty good, but then he told me my knees were the problem. He said, 'You're not eighteen years old anymore, you're eighty years old, so nothing much can be done.' I felt that was really a great teaching. It's very important to think about impermanence. He reminded me I'm eighty years old. That's wonderful. But my friend, you're even older than me."

"Are you showing off?" the Archbishop says.

"Oh, yeah," he says. He goes on: "Something else happened. The media at the airport said this was a special occasion. They said, 'You must be very happy to have Archbishop Tutu visiting.' I told them, 'Yes, indeed, I'm happy. I'm very happy. I'm receiving one of my very good friends. Firstly, on the human level, he's a very good human being. Secondly, he's a religious leader, a serious practitioner who respects different religious traditions. And then thirdly, and most important, he's my very, very close friend.'"

"You are flattering me," said Tutu.

"So then I told them that you often used to describe me as a mischievous person. So I said, I also consider you a mischievous person. And the meeting of two mischievous persons is wonderful. So happy reunion for us, and happy birthday." And they laughed.

"Thank you very much," the Archbishop said. "Thank you for welcoming us. Thank you for this great lunch. And thank you for putting out all those people along the road to welcome us."

You just get the spirit of these two world figures having a good time with one another, and how happy it makes you.

So what the Dharma has to offer first is a reminder of who we are. And this leads into a kind of equanimity.

It offers equanimity. You know the Ojibwa saying that's so often spoken: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." There is a reality that is vast, that we are a part of, and we can tune in to this mystery, to this vastness.

And we know it again when we sit quietly, or we take a walk in the hills, or we walk by the ocean, or watch that harvest moon that rose last week in such an amazing way, or we sit with someone giving birth. Give birth ourselves. Or sit with someone who's dying. Or make love, which is a wonderful, mysterious, wild thing to do, actually. Kind of

strange, isn't it? But cool. Yes, we like it. It's just—you know, these bodies are really weird. But wonderful at the same time. Or we listen to an amazing piece of music and all of a sudden we remember that we're connected with something so vast.

And we also sense the ephemeralness of it all, the emptiness of it, which is mysterious. I drove by the house that I had lived in, in Woodacre, for almost thirty years, that we sold a couple of years ago. And I looked at it—there's a new younger family in it. My daughter's thirty-two now and married and off working as a lawyer doing asylum and human rights law. But I looked at it and they'd repainted things, and I thought about all the things that had happened. We got this little bungalow and we put on all kinds of other parts, a new floor and all these gardens, and the people who'd come over and the adventures we'd had. No one remembers it. It's all gone. Except for me, and I'm just barely remembering it, right? It was there. And my daughter a little bit. But that's it. And my ex. It's gone. It's empty. This whole life and all that seems so real—and then what happens to it? It disappears and vanishes into emptiness. Because everything does. It's back there with the dinosaurs and the pharaohs and, you know, Y2K—remember that? Things appear and then they vanish.

And having a vast vision is such a beautiful thing. Because in the vast vision, you can see the turning of the seasons and the turning of the spheres, the magic of the earth making its way around the sun. Now we just came through the turning of the seasons and the last day of summer and the equinox. And it makes things become—they're ephemeral, but they actually become more precious.

What is life, says the Crowfoot elder? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It's the breath of a buffalo in wintertime. It's the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

And things appear, and they're very tender, and we love them, and then they change. And to have equanimity means that we can see the seasons of change. Civilizations come and go. Political parties come and go. Sometimes there's a lot of suffering in it, which is very sad, and we have to tend to it and try to prevent it. But we can't really prevent change, and we can't really prevent the changing of cycles of how human beings act. But we can take our seat somehow in the midst of it all, in all of the turning of the world, and remember our place in it so that we can plant beautiful seeds wherever we are.

Now John Muir, one of the greatest naturalists ever in the Western world—perhaps not counting the native naturalists, who were many—John Muir, who convinced Teddy Roosevelt to start the National Park System and make Yosemite the first park and all

those good things, one of the things he used to do, and there's a fantastic description of it, was to go out in the middle of a storm. You know, when a big storm is coming, we tend to batten down the hatches. But he said:

"On a particular day, one of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed in the Sierras occurred in December 1874, when I was exploring one of the tributaries to the Yuba River. The day was pure and balmy, but a bracing wind began, and I lost no time pushing out into the woods to enjoy it, for the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one experiences crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof. I took a long, tingling scramble through the copses and ceanothus and gained the summit of the highest ridge in the neighborhood. And then it occurred to me it would be a fine thing to climb one of the trees to obtain a wider outlook and get my ear close to the Aeolian music at its topmost needles.

"I made a choice of the tallest of a group of Douglas spruces that were growing close together like a tuft of grass. Though comparatively young, they were a hundred feet high, and their lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in ecstasy. Being accustomed to climb trees and making botanical studies, I had no difficulty reaching the top, but never before did I enjoy such a noble exhilaration of motion. The tops flapped fairly in the wind as I lashed myself, and the widest sweeps in my treetop described an arc from twenty to thirty degrees. I felt sure of its elastic temper."

This was like a great wave of grain, these huge trees in the wind. "And my eye rolled over the valleys, ridge to ridge, shining foliage, and the sounds of the storm's exuberance, the base of the naked branches and the boles booming like waterfalls, and the tingly vibrations of the pine needles. And I kept my lofty perch for hours, closing my eyes to enjoy the music of life itself."

So whenever you're having a hard sitting in meditation, or you're in the midst of one of those no good, terribly bad, difficult days, think of John Muir and say, "All right, I'm going to lash myself to the top in the middle of this huge storm and feel the movement of the seasons"—the tears that come through you, the grief that comes, the loss, the anger, the fear, the longing, the love, the joy, all the things that make you human. And remember that underneath all of that, there is a possibility of equanimity, of balance in the midst of it all.

That's really part of what the training of the Dharma gives you. Because otherwise, with climate change right there in our midst, or our concerns about elections or the Supreme Court or whatever it may be, we can get lost in a kind of reactivity. This doesn't mean you don't work for what you care about. But when Wes Nisker, a good friend and colleague here, went to talk to Gary Snyder a couple of years ago—Gary was eighty-four

at the time, this renowned environmentalist for the last half century, author of *Earth House Hold*, Pulitzer Prize winner—Wes said, "Gary, climate change, the oceans are rising, species are being lost, all kinds of disruption happening. What do you say to us as an environmentalist for all these decades?"

And Gary looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt or anger, because those are the very things that cause the problems. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it. Save it because it's you. It's part of you. It is your heritage. It's your body of the earth."

And so with equanimity, it's not that you can't act, but you have a sense of the storms coming and going—political, climate, whatever—and you find that vastness around it that says, "I can rest in a peaceful heart and I can tend this from a place of understanding rather than a place of fear." Because politics is trying to make you afraid, and you don't have to go down that road.

What's also true is that equanimity has to include suffering. Dina Metzger, friend and poet and activist, writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again." Because even though there is suffering, it turns out that suffering isn't the end of the story—it's only one part of the story, just as the seasons turn.

And so here are the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu together. At some point in their conversation, Tutu says, "How come you're not morose? How come you're not a sourpuss with all that's happened to you?" The Dalai Lama had never heard the word "sourpuss" before. They'd had a couple of conflicts as they were talking about different ideas about God, with their very highly developed intellects, and they were arguing about it in a very friendly way. And then at some point, the Dalai Lama pretended to reach over and choke Archbishop Tutu with his hands. And the Archbishop turned back to him and said, "Hey, the cameras are on us. We have to act like holy men. Come on."

There's something in this, in which he goes on to say, "Don't be a sourpuss." And they've kind of figured it out. There's something in equanimity that says you don't contribute to the world through your fear, through your depression, through your anxiety. You actually contribute to the world by bringing your steadiness and your love and your good heart.

The other thing that makes equanimity possible, and that the Dharma contributes, is laughter. It's called the laughter of the wise. I remember one night I was teaching here with a Tibetan Lama, and I was going along like I am with you. And he said, "Oh, I see what you do." I said, "Oh?" He said, "Yeah, you get them to laugh. And then when their mouths are open, you can pop the pill of wisdom in."

And so here's Tutu again, talking about laughter. He says, "It's so important to be able to have a sense of humor no matter how difficult things get. I remember one time we came to a township just outside of Johannesburg where the apartheid forces had provided weapons to one group and they had killed quite a number of people. We were having a meeting of bishops close by, and I was part of those leading the funeral of the victims of that massacre.

"So imagine: here you are, there's been terrible killing in the community. The people were obviously extremely angry, and I didn't know what to do. Yes, I cared about their grief, but then I remembered a story that had been told about how, at the beginning of creation, God had molded us out of clay and then put us into a kiln, like you do with bricks. God put one lot in and then got busy with other things and forgot about those he'd put in. And after a while, he remembered and rushed to the kiln, where the whole lot was burned to cinders. They say this is how we Black people came about."

Everyone laughed a little.

"And then I said, 'Next, God put in a second lot. And this time he was overanxious and opened the oven way too quickly. They weren't well baked, and this second lot came out completely underdone.'"

And that's how white people came about, and you can see it to this day.

But what's true in this is that you can always start again. Here they are in the middle of the suffering of the world, and yet the Dharma reminds us that it's possible—that suffering isn't the end of the story, that it's possible to take the suffering that we're granted or given and use it to develop the great heart of compassion. And that becomes the next gift of the Dharma: that compassion and wisdom can be the response to suffering and conflict.

As Abraham Lincoln said, "I've always found that mercy bears richer fruits than seeking strict justice." What a thing to say in the middle of a civil war that cost millions of lives and tore the country apart, where there would be so much cause for bitterness. "I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than seeking strict justice."

You remember a few years ago the terrible thing that happened to the Amish community when a shooter went into a schoolroom in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and kept ten girls in there and began to shoot them, killing five little girls and wounding others. The extraordinary thing was that within hours the Amish community forgave the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the world almost as much as the incident itself. Many lauded the Amish, but others worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy.

In dozens of interviews with Amish people, this writer discovered something else. Members of the community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor. Her grandmother laughed when asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually thought we called a meeting to plan forgiveness?" As the father of a slain daughter explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did."

Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were few words, but it was primarily their hugs, gifts, and mere presence that were acts of grace communicating Amish forgiveness. Of the seventy-five people at the killer's burial, almost half were Amish, including many parents who had buried their own children just the day before. The Amish people contributed to a fund for the shooter's family.

So what is our response to suffering in our own life and in the world around us? "Hatred never ceases by hatred," says the Buddha, "but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law."

And so we have forgiveness practice. Many of you have done it, and there are beautiful books on it in the bookstore. We have compassion training, and we have the training to see the noble truths—that there is suffering, there are causes to suffering, which are hatred, fear, greed, and ignorance, and there's an end to it, which is the opposite: the cultivation of love and courage, of generosity and clarity, and of gratitude.

The roots of suffering are a false sense of separate identity. We're different than them. We have to protect ourselves. The roots of love and wisdom are interdependence. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, woven together in a mutual garment of destiny," says Martin Luther King. To see with the heart, which is the Dharma, we see that it's us together. And there comes then tenderness and compassion. Whatever we value, whatever we celebrate, whatever we enforce in our lives, in our words, in our deeds, and in our politics is what will grow.

Here's the Dalai Lama again. What do you do about things that really need attention in this world? He says, "If something can be done about the situation, what need is there to be dejected? Let's just do it. And if nothing can be done about it, what use is there to be dejected? Because we can't change it."

The Archbishop said, "People know it in their head, but it doesn't help them. They still worry."

And the Dalai Lama went on, "Many of us have become refugees. There are a lot of difficulties in my own country." He cupped his hands into a small circle. "When I look at that, then I worry. I worry about the Tibetan people and all that I care about." But then he widened his hands. "But when I look at the world, there are a lot of problems everywhere. Other parts of the People's Republic of China, for example—the Uighur Muslim community has problems and suffering. And then outside of China, there are many more problems and more suffering, and refugees streaming across borders everywhere. Refugees like me."

When we see these things, we realize that not only do we suffer, but so do many of our human brothers and sisters. And when we look from a wider perspective, we reduce worrying and instead are motivated to tend to the world because it is our brothers and sisters. It shifts from being your personal suffering to becoming the pain of the world. This is part of what you're given, but it's not the end of the story.

The Zen teacher Karlfried Graf Dürckheim writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to those friends who offer them refuge and comfort and encourage the old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them."

And in this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening.

So trust, equanimity, a steadiness of heart. A wisdom that sees that suffering is caused by greed and fear and hatred and confusion, ignorance—and that suffering is ended by love and clarity and understanding and generosity. We know how to do this.

The development of compassion, especially in conflict. When you're in conflict, the question to ask of the other person in your heart—you don't have to say it out loud—is: What are your fears? What are your needs? What are your longings? What's behind this? Listen from heart to heart.

In kindergarten, when kids start hitting each other with the blocks, you say, "Put the block down and use your words," right? Could we not do that in other parts of the world for larger kids? Could we not do it in Syria? I could name fifty countries. Come on, use your words. Could we not begin to listen to what each other is afraid of? Because that's what's underneath a lot of it. And tend one another. Listen deeply.

I have a friend I'm in touch with, just tried to reach him yesterday, who's down in Colombia as part of the peace agreement. He's been working there for twenty-five years as a peacemaker, for the signing of the deal between the FARC and the Colombian government—to stop the last major war in all of South and North America. And it's really, hallelujah, it's an amazing thing because it's been fifty years. Reconciliation is possible. It is possible, but it requires us to pay attention in a different way—not from our small sense of self and our righteousness and all those things, but to quiet ourselves and say, what really matters?

I received this letter from a friend who sits here:

"My father was not able to communicate his love for his children, even though I found out later that he did love us. He just expressed it in ways that children couldn't necessarily understand. After my mom died, I told my dad I wanted a relationship with him, and we had many good years, but none of my siblings did this. My brother died at forty-eight of brain cancer. In his last few months, his wife called me and said Jay's one missing thing was that his father had never told him he loved him. I got on the phone and told my dad to say something on his next visit, but according to Daddy, the subject never came up.

"On Jay's last day, his wife Kathy called to say Jay would probably die within an hour. At that point, he was blind and paralyzed and hadn't spoken for more than a week. I had Kathy hold the phone to Jay's ear and told him that I loved him. Then I called my father. I said, 'Daddy, you have one more chance. Jay will probably die today. Pick up the phone and tell him that you love him.'

"And my father did just that. He called Jay. He told him that he loved him. And Jay, who hadn't spoken for more than a week, started talking and talked to Dad for more than an hour. Jay didn't even die that day. He rallied and lived for another month and spent a lot of time during that month talking often, enjoying his new relationship with his father."

It's possible. It's possible for us as human beings. And it's never too late. It's never too late to love.

So we set the compass of our heart in the best directions that we can. We incline ourselves to what's beautiful. And in this text the Buddha says, "Others may be cruel. We shall not be cruel. Thus we should incline our mind. Others will take what is not given. We will abstain from this."

Thus we shall incline our mind. Others will kill living beings. We will protect living beings. Thus we will incline our mind. Others will speak falsehood. We shall speak truth. Thus should we incline our mind. Others will be uncaring. We shall be compassionate. Thus we shall incline our mind. Others will be greedy and envious. We shall not be greedy and envious. Thus shall we incline our mind. We shall be generous. Others will be arrogant. We shall not be arrogant but humble. Thus we should incline our mind. Others will lack wisdom and compassion. We will cultivate wisdom and live with compassion. Thus we should incline our mind.

And it really speaks to the possibilities of us as human beings. What intention do we set our heart upon? What integrity do we most value? Others will slander. Others will cause harm. We will not do so. We will live in a different way. We will live with nobility and dignity. Thus we shall incline the mind. Others will be uncaring. We will be compassionate.

Now it doesn't mean when you're compassionate that you therefore have to go out and do everything for everyone. That would be a violence against yourself. For some of you it will be to raise a mindful and beautiful child. For some it will be to create art that redeems the world, that lets people see the wonder of it anew. For some it will be to run a conscious business. For many it will also be to become activists and work to heal injustice and to care for those who need their basic life to be valued. Put down the guns, bandage the wounds, carry the water, share the bread. These are all the works that you might do from a place of stillness, from quieting the mind and opening the heart.

And it's never been done before by somebody like you in the vast universe of a trillion stars, billions of galaxies. There's never been one being exactly like you. It's kind of wild, isn't it? That's the kind of abundance of life itself. "I'm going to make a new person that we've never seen, even though we've had billions of them before. Look at this one, try this one out." And you're one of them. It's never been done before.

There's a story of two acquaintances who drove up to the botanical garden in Montreal, a very special temple garden that had been moved from China to the West, home to the largest bonsai collection outside of Asia. They approached the massive gate and discovered that day it was locked. One of them panicked, ready to demand entry after driving four hundred miles from another country to see this. His husband Robert, like an Asian sage, simply treated the situation as a koan, a riddle to be solved. He stood

quietly for a time, and then he began to walk the outer wall of the garden, which was high, insurmountable. His partner was frustrated, but Robert kept slowly walking along the high wall. The garden stretched for two hundred acres or more, and his companion wondered, "Are we going to walk its entire perimeter?" The thought made him cranky, yet Robert kept walking mindfully and slowly. And suddenly, when they'd walked farther than was originally in their view, the walls disappeared. In fact, the garden itself had no walls, save for the façade at its entrance. They simply walked through the open grass to a path that welcomed them. What had seemed like an impenetrable barrier, a locked threshold, was actually a symbolic gate waiting for their patience and understanding.

I hope somehow in these words and in our sitting together, you sense the invitation extended to each of us—not to storm the gates of awakening, but to walk patiently along what appears to be an insurmountable wall until we discover, with wonder, that it was never really there at all.

The threshold awaits. Not locked, never locked—simply waiting for our patience, our understanding, and our willingness to take the next step.

CHAPTER 4

Spirituality and Politics (Drop-in at Spirit Rock) Part 1 of 2

Jack Kornfield · 1h09

> *In this timely talk delivered shortly after the 2016 U.S. election, Jack Kornfield addresses the fear, despair, and uncertainty many were experiencing, offering Buddhist perspectives on how to respond skillfully to challenging political and social circumstances. He explores how to work with the body's survival responses, the racing mind, and the heart's deeper wisdom, emphasizing the importance of not letting fear colonize our hearts.*
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> *Kornfield draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah about uncertainty, Gandhi's long view of history, and the joy exemplified by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu in their book "The Book of Joy." He shares the inspiring story of Vinoba Bhave, who walked across India simply listening to people's needs, catalyzing the largest voluntary land transfer in history. Through guided reflection, he leads practitioners in recognizing our shared humanity with others.*
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> *The talk weaves together practical meditation instruction with stories of courage and compassion, including the work of Grandmothers for Peace and support for Standing Rock water protectors. Kornfield reminds us that we've been training for difficult times through our practice, and encourages us to be strategic, to connect with others, and to carry what is beautiful from the temple back into the world. As he quotes Leonard Cohen: "Even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah."*

I'd like to invite you, as I talk tonight, to take this as a kind of meditation, which is to say you don't have to remember anything—there's no quiz at the end. You can listen and sense if there's something that resonates as helpful or true. If not, just let it go by. It's a very interesting and challenging time, so I simply want to reflect out loud and hope something is of use.

Before I start, though, I have a question to pose to you, just to hear and connect a little bit. What topics might you hope that I would touch on tonight?

Climate change. Anger management. Understanding. Equanimity. Despair. Fear. Totalitarianism. Survival. Healing. How to keep hearts open. Children. Activism. Trump—President-elect Trump, yes. Leadership. Race.

This is helpful.

It is a difficult time, post-election, and one of the things that I hope tonight and Spirit Rock can be for you—and as a reminder of what you can create within your own life—is a sanctuary. A sanctuary of calm, a sanctuary of loving awareness to hold everything.

Because difficulties are inevitable. If you haven't noticed in human incarnation, there's praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, success and setbacks and failures. Anybody not have that? You can have your eight dollars back, whatever you paid. It's going to happen. Trouble, said Zorba the Greek—that's called life.

And there's a purpose in it for us, or it can have a purpose, just as we go right now into the darkest time of the year, into the solstice. You can feel it with the time change and the seasons shifting. That darkness has a purpose, as the poet says: gradually it will school your eyes and your heart to find the luminous spirit, the true gifts that are required to navigate, hidden in this night's corner.

Thich Nhat Hanh often described how when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone on the boat to survive.

So here we are, and there are these national and international questions and uncertainties and fears, as people named: climate change, jobs, immigration, racism, Black Lives Matter, security, the role and the rights of women, LGBTQ rights, human rights in general, our prison system. All these things are in the process of being shaken, possibly changed in uncertain ways. We're right now in an uncertain time. We've actually been in uncertain times all along, just so you know. But it's particularly visible at certain times.

How do we respond in a time of uncertainty? I noticed myself after the election, and also talking to other people, that there were different levels of my experience.

My body, because I had a particular predilection in this election—which I won't say, but you could guess—felt, after a very long night, like PTSD. When I tuned into my body, there was that kind of fight, flight, or freeze that got activated. Fear, sadness, confusion. But more than that, it was somehow locked in my body.

And then I began to realize that the election, at least as I could see it, was also about survival—on both sides, on all sides. People who were worried about surviving in some way or other. And it moved survival fears from one group to another perhaps, but everybody who was part of it could feel: Will I survive? Will the things that matter to me survive?

If you look at it from a neuroscience perspective, as well as from the Dharma, you start to see that the way the campaign went, it somehow hijacked the limbic system, hijacked the reptilian brain. That was really what was operating for a lot of people—not the neocortex looking at things thoughtfully, but primitive fears. And so that was all in my body and in other people's bodies.

That's the first thing: being mindful, paying attention, acknowledging those survival fears, and also learning how to be present for them so they can unwind and untangle, so they're not carried in the way we react.

Then I looked at my mind. It was a mess. Racing and trying to figure things out, rehashing, "if only," planning. Somebody called this the United States of Anxiety right now. Catastrophizing in different ways. As Mark Twain said so notably, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." I could see all the catastrophizing, and my mind was just having a field day, going crazy. Okay, there's the mind.

Then I tuned into my heart, and that was different. It got quieter. That's the place where, for me, compassion, wisdom, love, and graciousness live. And somehow there was a sense of being here in the midst of it all—a stillness, a being present, which is what we did tonight when we sat, inviting ourselves to come into the present in a deeper way. To breathe, to relax, even amidst the uncertainty. To tie your shoes and keep walking in the right direction.

From that attention, I realized what was important: to not let fear take over my heart. Yes, there were the thoughts, and yes, there was stuff in the body, but the essential thing was to not let my heart be colonized by fear—by that kind of primitive activation that's been so powerful on all sides in the country.

And then I opened my attention in meditation further, to a kind of vastness—to what my teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows," to being the space of loving awareness as a witness with vast perspective. From this vastness, we sense the winter solstice coming and the turning of the seasons, the rise and fall of political dynasties, the rise and fall of whole civilizations and eras, the turning of the spheres. Somehow we're part of this whole great turning that we can see. We can become the witness, the one who knows, the loving awareness that says, "Wow, this is a historic time we're living through, where history becomes really visible"—with interest and care, but also not so tangled in the middle of it. There's a kind of equanimity, a balance, simply by making a vast space of it and looking over time, over a long period of time.

As Gandhi said, "When I despair"—so there he was, despairing like someone else who mentioned it here—"I remember that all through history, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Always."

Gandhi was taking that vast perspective. They can seem invincible, and when we look at the state of the world, there are tyrants in all kinds of forms. But in the end, they always fall. Always. And it was in some way that Gandhi could hold the dance of humanity—the tainted glory, the troubled life of human beings. Some of it stupendously, unbearably beautiful, and some of it, as my Zen master Seung Sahn, a Korean Zen master, would say, "Human beings—number one bad animal." You kind of get both sides to it.

I spoke last month when I was here about this beautiful new book that has come out called *The Book of Joy*, which is a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu. Some friends were able to fly Archbishop Tutu to Dharamsala and invite the two of them to have a week together, recording how it could be that they laugh and are joyful when Tutu lived through the horrors of apartheid—people being killed and shot and necklaced with tires and gasoline, just really atrocious times for a long period. And the Dalai Lama, even now, will meet people who walk barefoot over the Himalayas out of Tibet, people who've been in prison or tortured, and he hears those stories every week when he's there.

And yet somehow they laugh. The book is full of them playing with one another too. They're sitting about to have lunch, and Tutu starts to tell a story, and then the food starts to come in, and the Dalai Lama turns away. Tutu says, "You're not listening to me, Your Holiness! How am I going to get your attention?" And the Dalai Lama says, "I think maybe you need a stick to hit me with."

And so Tutu pretends to start hitting him, and the Dalai Lama says, "No, no, the cameras are on. We're supposed to be holy men. Cut that out." And you just feel their love for one another, which they actually express. There's something so beautiful. And you see there are a bunch of photos of them kind of laughing with one another.

They're talking about what it means to carry a sense of happiness and joy, even in the midst of the sorrows of the world. And they would say, what good does our spiritual life have for us if it leaves us depressed, if we can't truly be happy where we are?

And so then they start talking about where they might get reborn. Tutu says, "Do you really think that when—I didn't say if—when the Dalai Lama arrives in heaven, that God will say, 'Oh, Dalai Lama, you've been rather wonderful. What a pity you're not a

Christian. You'll have to go to that warmer place.'" And then Tutu pauses and in a very intimate moment says, "I think one of the best things that ever happened to me in my whole life was meeting you."

And then the Dalai Lama smiled and started to tell another story. And Tutu says, "I thought we were trying to eat. Come on, let's stop this story." They're just bantering back and forth.

They go on to talk about dying because they're old guys, they're in their eighties. The Dalai Lama says, "Well, I suppose you're going to go to heaven, right?" And Tutu says, "How about you?" The Dalai Lama says, "Maybe hell." Tutu says, "But I thought you Buddhists believe in rebirth." Then he pauses, and the Dalai Lama says, "Well, it's all uncertain. We have to wait and see. Even that is uncertain, right?" And Tutu goes on, "Well, you better be nice to the Chinese because they're planning to pick your next incarnation."

What they talk about amidst their teasing with one another is a deep joy and a celebration of the life they've been given no matter what. There's something magnificent and beautiful about life as it is—that the leaves on the trees take light and turn it into sugar. I mean, what a planet. It's fantastic. The turning of the seasons, the birth of new babies and children. All you have to do is see some little kid wandering around looking at the world. "Wow, where did I get born?" Looking at the trees.

I remember taking my daughter when she was little to these great monuments. You take a little kid to the Grand Canyon and they reach down and pick up a stone and say, "Isn't that pretty?" They don't need to look at the Grand Canyon because everything is the Grand Canyon to them. And you get that sense from the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu—this delight in being alive no matter what, and gratitude for it.

So how do we respond and not let fear take over the heart? This is really our question today. And how might we practice in such a way that fosters this?

Mindfulness, loving awareness, invites a deep listening, a kind of profound listening. Because if you look at the election, whatever side you are on or however you voted or believe, I believe the result of the election and of Trump's electoral victory—I see it as a symptom, not as something in itself concrete. I believe it's a symptom for many people of fear, that survival place, that expresses loss, pain, lack of hope or loss of meaning.

The question is: Can we not turn on one another? Can we turn toward one another? Can we listen to the fears that are underneath, the loss of meaning, all of those kinds of things? As Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, says, "Of what use is it to travel to the moon if we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves and from one another?"

And so to practice as we have is really an invitation to be present for the way things are and to listen more deeply than just the superficial level. And listening, it turns out for human beings, is a beautiful thing.

My beloved wife, Trudy Goodman, colleague, teacher, and inspiration to me—she's currently working in the Darfur refugee camps on the border inside Chad. The project she's working for involves people from her dharma community in LA. They went in and did something unusual in the camps.

They asked the women what they wanted. Usually aid comes in and somebody somewhere has an idea and they send it over. But they went in and they listened. They said to the women, "What do you want?"

And the women wanted two things. They wanted soccer so their children would have something uplifting to do and learn to cooperate with one another. And they wanted preschool and kindergarten so that the little ones would begin to perhaps unravel their trauma somewhat, but also begin to realize that they could learn about the world. What a beautiful thing—to ask people and then listen. "What is it that you want?"

So Trudy is there training teachers, because she had run a school for little children for a long time, including disabled children, so she knows a great deal about it. She's training teachers in trauma work for young children and in the arts of emotional intelligence and that aspect of education. And it all started simply by listening.

I was working recently with a very famous playwright in America who was worried because her son, now in his forties, was an artist and painter who didn't sell very many paintings. She'd been supporting him. Couldn't he get a job? Wasn't she just enabling him and ruining his life? She, as a playwright, was very successful and quite wealthy, and she'd been supporting him. The son was married, they had a couple of kids. And she said, "Somehow I feel like I'm ruining his life by not letting him become the man he should be."

And I said, "Well, maybe so. Why don't you ask him?" That little surprise. "Oh!"

So we sat down together and she asked him, and he said, "No, this is exactly what I want to do. Thank you. Thank you, Mom. I want to paint. I feel like not only that, I use my art in this way and that way. You're helping me live exactly the life I want. I don't want to be a schoolteacher. I don't want to be the things you envision I should be. Thank you."

There's just something about listening to somebody and asking them, "What is going on for you? What matters?"

One of my favorite dharma stories is of a man named Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba Bhave was probably, after Gandhi, the most important leader in the Gandhian movement after Mahatma Gandhi died. When Gandhi died—after the partition of India and Pakistan and all of the destruction that happened as people fled and there was violence—in those new nations, after Gandhi was assassinated, the people who followed him were depressed, if not despairing, as someone raised those words in this room.

Vinoba, who had been very close to Gandhi, just kind of went on retreat. It was like after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, how people were dispirited. They lost their spirit in some ways. It was so terrible.

A couple of years passed, and some of the people said, "We want to have a conference to continue his work. We want to have a gathering, to bring the community together of those around Gandhi. Would you, Vinoba, fly across the country and meet us in Madras or wherever it was going to be and be our leader? Help us."

And he refused.

They pressed him. "Will you come? Will you come? We need your voice."

Finally he said, "All right, I will come under one condition. I need to walk there."

The walk was six months across a great part of India. And so he started to walk. He would go into the rural villages in the different, poorer parts of India and sit under the big tree that you find in the center of many Indian villages. He would sit with people in the evenings and simply have a listening circle, asking, "What is your life like? What's happening for you as human beings?"

After visiting a series of villages, he began to hear more and more how the very poorest of the Indians there at that time were like indentured servants to a system where they couldn't raise their children well, couldn't make very much money, because they were farmers working someone else's land and getting just a pittance, a meager amount.

He became more and more troubled. So he went to sleep, woke up the next morning, called them all together and said, "When I go back to Delhi, I'm going to meet with Prime Minister Nehru"—whom he knew—"and I'm going to get the government to start a program to give parcels of land to the landless among you so you can grow your own food."

And everyone became very happy.

He was delighted, and he stayed another night—but he didn't sleep very well. He called them together the next morning and said, "You know, I didn't sleep well because I realized the way government works." At least at that time in India, and other places in the world, including here. He said, "By the time the money gets allocated and goes through the states or the provinces and the districts, when the government allocates it, even if I can get them to do it, by the time it gets to you, there ain't going to be much." He was not all that trusting of government, which is also in the air right now in certain ways.

And so he became a little bit despondent. What can we do? And then a man stood up—one of the wealthiest men in that particular village, a landowner. He said, "You have come with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, who is so revered in India. And I hear this problem. How much land do we need for these families?" It turned out there were sixteen families, and they needed five acres apiece or something like that to actually have a sustainable farm. And the man said, "In the honor of Gandhi, I have land, and I will grant them—the sixteen families—I will grant eighty acres of land." It was a beautiful gesture and a gift.

So Vinoba then walked the next day, two days to the next village, listened to their problems and concerns, especially for those who were the outcasts in that system—because that's a kind of racist apartheid system as well—and their struggles. And then he told the story of what had happened in the previous village. And one of the rich elders in that village stood up and said, "Well, in the spirit of Gandhiji, how much land do we need in this village?" And there were twelve families or something. "I will give sixty acres."

And it began then, what turned into the Bhoodan Indian Land Reform Movement. Vinoba Bhave, from that point on, walked for more than a decade through every state and province in India, and with his people collected fourteen million acres of land that people voluntarily turned over to those who were poorer, who had nothing. It was the biggest land transfer in the history of the world, all done because he simply went and sat under the trees and listened to what people really needed.

This is what listening is about in some way.

I have this page that I love, that my daughter wrote when she was in second grade. She said, "Dad, I think you could use this." You all know this passage, but it's written in that elementary school handwriting: "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would surely die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man." That's that famous passage from Chief Seattle.

And so when we listen—and someone mentioned climate change, which is of course an enormous global problem—listening also means listening to the earth and really listening to what's happening, so that we can respond in a way that is direct and courageous and intelligent, no matter what.

I just came back from spending some weeks with my twin brother, who's in the middle of a very difficult cancer treatment. He has a kind of blood cancer, and he's been treated at Dana-Farber in Boston and at Brigham Hospital. Sitting in the hospital or in the cancer center, as I have on and off now for some weeks or months—it's kind of an amazing thing. First of all, the doctors and the staff there have been fantastic. They're just so devoted and loving. It's really amazing. And sometimes they succeed and sometimes they don't. But their care is beautiful.

And then you see all these families. It's not just the people with the bald heads and the cancer patients—and they can be little kids or they can be old people, every age. But you see all the concerned families, all the brothers and sisters and moms and children. And there's something so tender about it. And then I start to feel all the people in the world who are tending one another when they get sick. It's not just there, but it's us taking care of each other. And there's something in just letting myself listen to that and see it—even though it's tragic in certain ways, there's also something magnificent in the kind of care and love that people offer to one another.

So I want to ask you to do something. I'd like you to look around a little bit and catch one or two people's eye or glimpse. It doesn't have to be that soulful Sufi stare or something like that. But just to look around at some people near you while I read a little passage to you. Just look at some folks and let them look at you. Pick one.

This person has a body and a mind, just like me. This person has feelings, emotions, thoughts, joy and sorrow, just like me. This person has in his or her life experienced physical and emotional pain and suffering, just like me. This person has at some point been sad or disappointed, just like me.

Let yourself see.

This person has at some point been hurt or angry, just like me. This person worries and is frightened sometimes, just like me. This person has longed for friendship, just like me. This person is learning about life, just like me. This person wishes to be free from pain and suffering, just like me.

Keep looking at someone. Keep it going.

This person wants to be caring and kind to others, just like me. This person wishes to be safe and healthy, just like me. This person wishes to be happy, to be loved, just like me.

And you start to feel, as you do this, the natural metta, the natural care. All it takes is a little bit of attention and listening. And you see: Oh, I wish that this person would be well, that they would have friendship and love and compassion for the difficulties, and be freed from struggle and be happy, peaceful. It's innate in us. And all it asks is a little bit of our attention.

What happens is you drop into the heart. As you quiet the mind and listen to the heart, you also tune into the universal laws of things. The noble truths: that suffering has its causes. Greed, hatred, ignorance—these become the cause of suffering. Prejudice, delusion, racism, the kind of fears that we carry—all those things create suffering.

And their opposite, which is your birthright, which is also possible for you. This is one of the beautiful things with the Dalai Lama and Tutu, because they keep talking about human possibility. This is the world that we are directing ourselves toward. The opposite: love, clarity, wisdom, truthfulness, generosity, gratitude. These bring happiness.

And so when the Buddha was asked about society, he said: Yes, when members of the society meet in harmony and depart in harmony, when they treat one another with respect, the society will prosper and not decline. When they honor the timeless wisdom, the ancient wisdom, they will prosper and not decline. When they care for the most vulnerable among them—the women and the children, the aged—they will prosper and not decline. When they tend and care for the natural world around them, even then, they will prosper and not decline. When they treat one another with respect, they will prosper and not decline. When they cultivate their personal mindfulness and loving kindness, such a society will grow and prosper and not decline.

You just look from the heart and you see what works for the happiness of human beings. Just like me, that person and that one and that one want to be happy. And you see the truth again from the Buddhist teachings: that hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. It doesn't matter what has happened—this is the way that it works. Hatred never ends by hatred.

Or, as Mark Twain said, kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see. There's something really beautiful in that—that kindness is the language that the blind can see and the deaf can hear.

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you are. Remember the fundamental dignity that was born into you and in all beings. And as you listen, let your listening to one another be a listening that respects the dignity of the other, that each being deserves respect.

Let me share a story. The man was aged but looked many years older. He was an army veteran. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see he had tried to wash up before coming to the social services department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. And though he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores.

I wanted to get him into rehab and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets. "No ma'am," he said, "all I'd like is a few dollars and some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town."

That shelter had fifty beds—cots, really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds and nearly a thousand homeless in this part of the city. Winters here in Northern California means cold rain and mud. Even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrated everything.

His clothes and the bedroll he'd placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of a book he carried were swollen with moisture. I asked him how many times he'd tried rehab.

"Two or three," he said. "Long time ago."

"Maybe it's time to try again." I explained that I'd had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. "Besides," I said, "we're months away from warmer weather. What else have you got going on?"

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eyes, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard—impossibly hard. And so he was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone. "Shall I?" I asked. He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left.

I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors, holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

This is possible. It's there in us.

Now, what's also true—and this is the trauma and the fear we carry—is that more veterans from Vietnam have died of suicide than the names written on that wall. How do we care for them? How do we care for one another?

So in times of change, oh nobly born, here is what's asked: a kind of courage. But the first aspect of courage is humility. To be still. Not to react so quickly. There's a place for reaction, certainly. But can you find in your being the ability to stay present and still even amidst uncertainty?

My teacher Ajahn Chah used to say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" When people would ask him about anything, he would just laugh and say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" This was one of his favorite phrases, and he would drum it into you. "How do I do this?" *It's uncertain, isn't it?* "What about that?" *It's uncertain, isn't it?* "Tell me about enlightenment." *It's uncertain, isn't it?* "You're supposed to be enlightened!" *It's uncertain, isn't it?*

There's a kind of humility being asked of us—to acknowledge that we actually don't know yet. We don't know what will happen politically, whatever side you're on. We don't know what will happen in other ways in society or in the world. It's not given to us yet to know that. And so we have to let ourselves wait and look and listen deeply.

It says in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Can you be still and not act until the right action comes of itself? Can you let the mind and heart settle like stirred up water until things are clear and you know how to act in concert with the Tao?"

This also asks of us a kind of trust. Trust in mystery. Trust in something vast, in the huge cycles of history. We're in a historic period, and a visible one to us. But there are other realities that are also true.

Gandhi again: "I believe in the unity of all things. And therefore I believe that if one person gains, the whole world gains. And if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent."

So humility...

It's interesting reading Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, because they're asked: What do you do in times of despair? How do you respond? And they offer this beautiful phrase. They say, "You show your humanity." What do you do in times of despair? You show your humanity. And they do—they make themselves vulnerable.

Here's a favorite story. Most of you know who Black Elk was, the great Sioux Lakota medicine man, one of the greatest of his era. There's a famous biography by John Neihardt called *Black Elk Speaks*. In the last chapter, Neihardt tells about Black Elk's final hike up Harney Peak, this mountain in the middle of the Dakotas where he'd had his sacred vision as a young shaman.

This holy man explained to Neihardt that when death approaches, a Lakota could climb this mountain to see if the Great Spirit had approved of their life. Rain would fall on those who had received the blessing or approval of the Great Spirit.

As a young man, Black Elk had experienced a vision that told him how to save his people and homeland from the soldiers and settlers. Remember, this was probably back in the 1890s that he was born. Through all his years, he had worked to fulfill this vision and restore what he called the sacred hoop, the circle of life. However, he felt that he had failed and that the sacred hoop was broken.

The day of his climb, Black Elk was an old man. He dressed in red long johns, moccasins, war paint, and a feathered war headdress. Slowly and laboriously, he climbed to the summit, oblivious to the tourists who stared at him. Neihardt teased him, saying that he should have picked a day with at least one cloud in the sky, but Black Elk rebuked him, saying that the rain would have nothing to do with the weather.

At the top of the peak, not far from the tourists, the old man lay down under a blue sky. To his astonishment, Neihardt watched as a few small clouds immediately formed over Black Elk, and a soft rain began to fall. Black Elk wept with relief. He felt that even though he had not succeeded in fulfilling the vision of the sacred hoop, the Great Spirit was signaling to him that he had done his best.

We are really in the midst of something so much vaster than our ideas—whether political or international, social or spiritual, all the kinds of ideas we carry. We're in the middle of some vast mystery of human incarnation on this earth and its evolution, we hope, on a good day, with its fits and starts. That's how it works. And we don't know.

But what we can do is begin to find a trust that we can do our part in this, no matter what. Like Black Elk, we don't know about restoring the sacred hoop. But as it says in the end, he wept with relief even though he had not succeeded in fulfilling his vision. The Great Spirit was signaling that he had done his best. He had done his part.

This is the secret. You're part of something vast and enormous, and the secret is to act beautifully even though it's not given to you to determine the outcome. To act beautifully without attachment to the fruits of your actions—because that's not given to you. But what is given to you is your heart and your voice and your spirit.

And sometimes it doesn't take that much. It only takes a little loving awareness at the right time with that person or those people.

I received this note from someone. I get all kinds of messages—descriptions of people's practice, questions, expressions of gratitude. This was a thank-you note:

"I don't really know how to talk to Jack directly, but I want to express how grateful I am right now just to be aware of your teaching. I found you listening to the podcast of Duncan Trussell. And little by little, your idea of loving yourself and having compassion kept inching their way toward what I guess is my heart. You soothed me in some of the darker days of my life and gave me a glimpse into a more loving reality.

Tonight, after resisting for months and months, I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided, after hearing you speak through my phone for all these months, that I would just sit with myself for a while and see what happened. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the twenty-one years I've lived so far.

For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I'd latched onto, my hatred, my anxiety, my self-judgment, everything else I criticized myself about—with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I just finally got some relief from what I felt inside. And I want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you. Thank you so much."

It doesn't take that much. Finally sitting down and saying, we can do this. I can do this. You've been training for this kind of period that we're going through for a long time. You have.

And the words from the Buddha again, from the Majjhima Nikaya—something in your heart knows the truth of this:

Others will be cruel. We shall not be cruel. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will kill or harm living beings. We will not harm living beings. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be greedy. We will be generous. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will speak falsely, maliciously. We will speak truthfully and kindly. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be envious. We will not be. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be arrogant. We will not be arrogant. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be unmindful. We shall establish mindful presence. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others will lack wisdom. We shall cultivate wisdom. Thus we will incline our hearts.

This is an instruction of intention. But it's really a description of what you've been doing and learning—not just here at Spirit Rock. Some of you have come for a long time, some are quite new. But you're here, and in some way your presence is an expression of the wisdom that you already carry. It's not that you're getting something new here. You're just getting a little team spirit or something like that. You've been training for this for a long time—in steadiness, in compassion, in deep values.

And in times of uncertainty, you become the real bodhisattva. Bodhisattva means a being who's dedicated to compassion for all life, no matter what. In Zen they say there are only two things: you sit and you sweep the garden, and it doesn't matter how big the garden is. You quiet the mind, open the heart, and then you get up from sitting and you tend—whether it's the climate or whether it's immigrants or whatever is in front of you that needs your care and attention. People are hungry, you feed them. Someone's hurt, you bring what healing you can. Not because you're supposed to, or it's going to make you some special person. But as the Dalai Lama says, it's the only thing that brings true joy in this life—to be able also to serve life itself, to bring some of your gift to this world, to make a difference to a single child, to make a conscious business, to fight for justice.

And so you quiet the mind. And like the Tao, you let yourself get still until the right action arises. You want to be strategic at this time. And strategic means that you do have to be quiet. Make yourself a zone of peace and let yourself become a sanctuary, so that the work and the things you care about come from a deep place of understanding and the courage to be true to your heart.

And then you connect with the others after you sit quietly. Trudy said in the Darfur refugee camps, the greeting—they don't ask how you are. The greeting there is, "How is your family?" That's how they greet one another. What a beautiful greeting. How is your family? And then, of course, Mother Teresa said the problem with you is that you may draw your family circle too small.

How is your family? And it's a big family. It's humanity. It's the animals. It's the beings of the earth. It's libertarians and Democrats and Republicans and Greens and all those in-betweens.

A person with courage never needs weapons, but they may need bail. And as Thomas Jefferson says, one person with courage is a majority. One person with courage is a majority.

I read this last time about Barbara Widener, who founded Grandmothers for Peace. She says, "I began to question what kind of a world am I leaving for my grandchildren? So I got a sign, 'A Grandmother for Peace,' and stood on a street corner. Then I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory. I was taken to prison, strip searched, thrown into a cell. Something happened to me. I realized they couldn't do anything more. I was free." And now Barbara and her organization, Grandmothers for Peace, works in dozens of countries around the world. One person with courage is a majority.

The courage to connect. How is your family? To say that to anybody. How is your family?

And as the Dalai Lama and Tutu speak about, to rejoice. To see the enchantment of the world, no matter what, because it is extraordinary. To bring a beautiful smile and a joyful heart, even into the circumstances of difficulty. To live with gratitude—whether it's the holy or the broken hallelujah, to honor our beloved friend Leonard Cohen, who just died. "Even though it all went wrong, I stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah." It's been played too many times, but it doesn't matter. It's still really good.

So I have a treat for you, but first there's a couple of treats. There's a little addition to tonight's talk and then our small treat to end. I want to invite my dear friend and colleague, Thanissara, who's going to speak for just a few minutes.

Thanissara was a Buddhist nun for fourteen years. And then she and her beloved husband, who was a monk for even longer, jumped over the wall and got married instead of staying in the monastery. Then they went to South Africa and opened a Dharma center in KwaZulu-Natal—not just a Dharma center, but also a center for healing during

the AIDS epidemic. It was a center for community development, community organizing in a very poor part of the country. They did that for quite a long time, for a decade or two. And now they're back here part of the time and teaching on occasion at Spirit Rock. They do extraordinary work, and she has a request to make of you tonight.

Thanissara began: "Thank you so much, Jack. Thank you for such beautiful and uplifting and hopeful and insightful and profound and healing words, which we all need at this moment. I'm really glad that you mentioned Black Elk and the Sioux peoples, because that's what I want to talk about tonight and ask for your support.

"In response to an invitation by Chief Arvol Looking Horse, who is out there on the North Dakota plains, on behalf of his peoples, the Sioux peoples, and the two hundred and eight tribes that have gathered there now—to help, with allies from across the country and around the world, to try to protect the sacredness of their lands and of the waters against the Dakota pipeline that's being laid with a great deal of aggression and intimidation. It's a very difficult dynamic.

"The invitation of Chief Arvol was for people of prayer, for people of peace, and particularly those who are religious people, people of faith, to come to the site and join in and offer prayers and stand with the peoples there—and for some people to stand on the front lines."

So this is a request that I felt very moved by, and felt compelled to respond to, to try and find a way to contribute so that a Buddhist presence can be there with other peoples of faith. About five hundred faith leaders have just been there to spend time with the community.

One thing I thought I could do—I'm going there actually on Saturday myself with a small group, helping to prepare some lodging and space for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship delegation that's going the week after. With a few friends, we're doing a fundraiser to help get some tipis there, to help winterize them, and to have provisions for Dharma practitioners to go and join this community and lend their support.

Since the climate march a few years ago, there has been a strong Buddhist presence and faith presence in supporting this need for us now to shift our ways of drawing energy from fossil fuels to renewables. And this Buddhist presence and voice, for all the reasons that Jack talked about tonight, is very important—this flavor of peace, of depth, of consciousness, of love over hate. Guided by masters like Thich Nhat Hanh, this is the kind of energy of spirit and sacredness that we can bring to these frontline struggles.

Today, just to finish, I spoke with a sangha member, Milo Byrne, from the San Francisco Zen Center, who's actually there on site at the moment. I asked him, "Have you got a few words? Because I'll be giving this talk tonight and asking for support, for contributions for this fundraising campaign to get those tipis there."

He was full of a great sense of spirit, actually. He said, "This is a generous community. People care a lot. We are holding a beautiful, prayerful space. Communities of resistance are really important, particularly aligned with Thich Nhat Hanh's encouragements. This interfaith gathering of spontaneous community is resistance through love." He said it's also cold.

So friends, I ask you to add to the dāna tonight. The dāna, I believe, is going to this effort. I ask you to give generously and to help me get shelter and supplies to those on the front lines by supporting this initiative. As you support this initiative, you're supporting the rights and dignity of the First Nations peoples of this land, who call us all relatives and who consider their actions also of benefit to our children and grandchildren up to the seventh generation and beyond.

Thank you. All my relations.

Thank you, Tanisara. There will be baskets as you leave for you to support and contribute. For those of you who can't go, you can help in that way.

What the times ask of us, and what the earth asks of us, is a change of consciousness—to shift from the fearful, separate consciousness, the consciousness of me versus someone else, to the consciousness of connection and interdependence and compassion. We're doing that work. Each of us, in our way, is invited or asked to find a kind of freedom of spirit no matter what happens, and to carry what's beautiful into the world.

And even though it all goes wrong, I stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah.

We've got to sing in here more. I like it. It's great.

Thank you.

Keep your heart strong. You've been training for this for a long time. And carry what's beautiful from the temple back out into the world.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

And thank you to Nisra too.

Good night.

CHAPTER 5

Spirituality and Politics (Drop-in at Spirit Rock) Part 2 of 2

Jack Kornfield · 2h15

> *In this Monday night teaching at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield and Trudy Goodman offer reflections on navigating uncertain times through Buddhist practice. Jack draws on the story of Emperor Ashoka's transformation and the Buddha's final teachings on what makes a society prosper—harmony, care for the vulnerable, and fostering mindfulness. He emphasizes that the Buddha's touching-the-earth gesture represents our capacity to trust in awakening despite Māra's challenges of temptation, aggression, and doubt.*
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> *Trudy shares her profound experience teaching mindfulness to traumatized preschool teachers and soccer coaches in a Darfuri refugee camp in Chad. She reflects on the stark juxtaposition between affluent Western life and bare subsistence existence, yet notes the resilience and grace of people who show up to serve children despite chronic hunger and illness. The teaching highlights how simple loving presence and the ability to return attention to the present moment can be transformative for those experiencing trauma.*
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> *The evening concludes with a blessing cord ceremony for the solstice, where participants tie three knots representing non-harming, refuge in the sacred, and heart intention for the year ahead. The teachers invite practitioners to become 'the weight that tips the balance' toward goodness, planting seeds of compassion even in times of darkness.*

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to Spirit Rock on this wonderful Monday night.

So, we are live streaming tonight. If Jack and Trudy do some Q&A, remember that if you ask a question, you will be on camera and it will be broadcast. So if you prefer not to be broadcast, please don't ask a question tonight.

We have listening-assisted devices available on the back ledge of the sound booth. So if you're having a tough time hearing tonight, they're working very well, and you might want to try one of those.

During our break tonight, you can go up to the West Hall if you'd like. We have two virtual reality systems set up, and you can check out Living Insight, a virtual reality meditation that was produced at Spirit Rock with Jack. That's in the East Hall upstairs, and it'll be there during break.

Jack is our founding teacher at Spirit Rock, and Trudy is the founder of Insight LA. Very happy to have them with us tonight.

It is so much fun being newlyweds at this stage of life. Trudy and I got married this summer, and so far, it's actually going very well. We've had a good time. Really fun.

So it's a great pleasure to welcome you here tonight for this Monday Night Sitting group, which has now been ongoing for thirty-two years. In this last year or two, as I've come into my seventies, I've been teaching it less—more like once a month now. I did it once a week for those thirty years or whatever it was. And we have a whole panoply of other wonderful teachers who come and meet with folks on Monday night. But I'm very happy to be back and to welcome you here.

How many are here for the first time to Spirit Rock? Particularly a pleasure to welcome you all.

Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley through a whole community's care and commitment to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—that are part of the Buddhist teachings, but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. And so through the care and the efforts of many, many people, we've created a sanctuary here, and we want to welcome you.

How many of you are new to meditation practice? Virgins in Marin, still! Wow. Particularly welcome. We'll have a little bit of instruction.

What we do Monday night is quite simple. We sit for thirty or thirty-five minutes in silence with a little bit of instruction. Then we take a break—ten or fifteen minutes to stretch and relax. That's usually followed by some teachings, as it will be tonight with Trudy and myself, and sometimes some dialogue or questions and answers. To end this evening, we're also going to do a little bit of ritual for those who wish to participate.

I have another question I want to ask of you. How many of you are involved in some form of work as service—whether you are teachers or healthcare workers, teaching English to someone who doesn't know it, or any other form of service? Ah, and the others are your clients that you brought along, right?

That's a beautiful thing to see as well. And it's not to divide the group in some way, because we all go at different cycles in our life, in and out of the times when it's time to serve in one way or another. The main thing is you don't want to use your spiritual practice to judge yourself. You're already too good at that, and we don't need to add another layer.

Mostly it's just a pleasure to be together. It's almost full moon and almost the solstice—all the turnings of the seasons.

So let us begin with some meditation practice. Sit together. Find a way to sit that is comfortable and stable, feet flat on the floor, perhaps sitting upright in your chair or on your cushion or bench—whatever way allows your body to rest stably on the earth. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently.

You take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human form, under your own tree of enlightenment. As you begin to pay attention, notice the state of your body this evening—this precious human body. If there's any obvious tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Relax the shoulders and let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body, gravity, the heaviness of your body in contact with the cushion, the chair, the earth. Feel how the earth can completely support you. You can let go and be fully held on the earth, just here. Let your belly be soft and the breath natural. Let your heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to pay attention to the experience just now—the living experience of this moment, this life. Feelings, thoughts, sounds. Establish a presence of mindfulness, a loving awareness.

After just a minute or so, you notice that as you establish the sense of loving awareness and presence, the attention very often wanders away—thinking, planning, remembering, imagining. So underneath the waves of thoughts and plans and memories and sounds, to deepen the sense of presence, feel the wave of the breath, this life breath that breathes itself constantly. Drop into the rhythm of the breath with your awareness. Feel it as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to feel, you can simply put your hand on your belly and feel the belly rise and fall in the palm of your hand for the meditation.

As you sense each breath, let each breath invite a calm, steady quieting of body and mind. Breathing in, breathing out. Receive with loving awareness, quieting the mind, steadying the body. Just here, this breath.

Again, after just a minute or two with the breath, you notice how after three breaths or six breaths, the attention again gets pulled by other experiences. If the experiences are in the background—thoughts and feelings and sounds—let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. But if something becomes stronger, then let go of attention to the breath. As if to bow to it, receive it with the same loving awareness you've given to the breath. Name it gently: "Oh, sadness," or "excitement," or "planning." As you name it—"sad, sad," or "excited," or "planning"—feel that wave of energy move through your body and mind. When that wave has passed, rest in the stillness and again feel the breath for a time, until another strong wave arises to be received with the same loving awareness.

Rest just here in the reality of the present. Steady. Kind.

Noticing the ever-changing breath, or receiving the visiting waves of experience with loving awareness, naming them gently, letting them rise and pass. This breath, or this moment's experience—receive with loving awareness. Just this. Steady with the breath, calming, centering. And a mindful bow to whatever arises: joy or fear, anger, longing, worry, delight, connection. Naming it gently. This too, receive with loving awareness. Receive with a peaceful heart.

It's really quite a wonderful thing to sit among so many other human beings who are quiet. It's quite fantastic. Thank you.

So please let yourself sit back down and get settled again. Let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable and at ease.

The teachings that are offered are not something particularly to believe or follow, but rather something to contemplate or reflect on. At best, they're reminders of something that you already know—something that's true in your own heart and your own experience.

I'll start and Trudy will follow, and then we'll do some kind of ritual as well. It was interesting driving up here, seeing the almost-full moon—tomorrow night it will be full. It's the December moon. And getting ready for the solstice that comes in not many days, this next week.

We had a meeting this morning of much of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council and other teachers who teach here. The conversation was about how Spirit Rock can be and is a sanctuary for people—how it can be a sanctuary in these times for those who come here and also for others who are in danger.

For all who are here tonight, it's such a pleasure to sit together. This becomes a place to quiet the mind and open the heart and listen deeply to what really matters. As a sanctuary, we welcome everyone—whatever race or orientation or ability or background or caste or creed—whoever you are, the Dharma gates welcome you. From the very beginning, the teachings of the Buddha were inclusive. They would say of this sage Gautama that he allowed everyone to join, not just the high caste or whatever it was. Everyone is welcome in the Dharma gates.

I've been traveling, some of it with my beloved, Trudy. I was on the East Coast for a while with my twin brother, as he's going through some of the difficult stages of cancer treatment at Dana-Farber. It's beautiful to see how much care and how steady and devoted the caregivers are at the hospitals and cancer centers, and all the families supporting people.

We were also just leading a retreat together with Ram Dass in Hawaii—a tough assignment. Ram Dass is eighty-five now, and he mostly talks about love. He has this huge altar at his house with images of the Buddha and Ganesha and Krishna and Shiva and the Dalai Lama and Gandhi and Mother Teresa and various Indian saints and sages. And then in the middle—it had been Dick Cheney and John Boehner for a while—now there's a big picture of Donald Trump. He says, "I love everybody. They're all on my altar and I pray for them all." It's a beautiful thing.

It is a beautiful and precious thing to be able to come and practice, to have a refuge or a sanctuary where we can steady our hearts, where we can quiet our minds, and make ourselves peaceful, especially in these times.

One of the great true stories in Indian history concerns the man who became Emperor Ashoka of the largest empire in India and surrounding lands over the last couple of thousand years. He was a conquering king who had just finished a huge battle conquering the southern part of the subcontinent. He was sitting in his tent, looking out over the battlefield afterward, which his troops had won. He saw so many people who had been killed, including some of his beloved friends and soldiers.

And then he saw a monk walking along the edge of the field, very peacefully, going out with his bowl for morning alms food. And he said, "I, who am the emperor of lands that stretch for a thousand leagues in every direction and can command anything, have everything at my fingertips—but I don't have the one thing I see that monk has, which is peace of mind."

So he called the monk over. It turned out to be a very wise and compassionate monk who began to offer teachings: "If you're seeking happiness, happiness won't come from greed. It won't come from hatred and violence. It won't come from ignorance. Here are the roots of happiness: generosity, love, care for one another." He began to give instructions, outwardly and inwardly, to quiet the emperor's mind and open his heart.

Eventually Ashoka became the most benevolent emperor in that whole thousand-year history of India. Today there are stone pillars still standing all around India inscribed with his edicts, which say that everyone should be treated with respect no matter what their birth, that everyone of every religion should be respected, that the natural world should be cared for. These were planted throughout his entire empire. And it all came because he looked and saw: I have everything but one thing. I don't have peace of mind. I don't have a peaceful heart.

As it says in the Tao: "Have you the patience to wait till the mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain still and unmoving until the right action arises of itself from the heart?"

To come here and sit together is an invitation to come back and listen more deeply to what matters. This becomes particularly important in times of change and uncertainty. It seems, said the Buddha, that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not.

I remember very much how my teacher Ajahn Chah would answer many of the questions we asked him with a bit of a twinkle. He'd say, "Hmm, it's uncertain, isn't it?" We could ask him about all kinds of things. "Tell me about enlightenment." Instead of giving some philosophical answer, he'd look and say, "Hmm, it's uncertain, isn't it?" What's going to happen? What should I do? "Oh, it's uncertain, isn't it?"

He wanted us to become comfortable with uncertainty and to see, in the traditional language, *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*—that wherever we look, things are impermanent and in change, if you haven't noticed.

And that wherever you look, there is both sukha, or pleasure, and there is dukkha—loss, and trouble, and suffering, as well as joy and beauty. The world is composed of both, and you cannot run away from it, cannot have one without the other. And it's not in your control.

So then the question becomes: How do you navigate this particular human incarnation that you've been given?

When Ajahn Chah was invited to start a monastery in England some thirty-five years ago, he brought his first group of Western-trained monks to a little place that had been offered in London, stayed with them for a bit, and then left them there. They were meditating, going out for their alms food, living their life in this community of half a dozen people.

He came back a year later to visit and asked, "How is it going?"

They said, "Oh, swimmingly"—I suppose that's what you say in England. "It's going well."

"How are you getting along?"

"Oh, we're getting along beautifully. It's all going well."

And he looked at them and said, "Well, then there's not going to be much wisdom here, is there?"

Of course, he didn't really believe them either. That's the other part of it. Because the point wasn't to make things easy. The point is to take the human incarnation that you are given—with its joys and its sorrows, with its gain and loss, with pleasure and pain, with disruptive things and difficult things—and ask, "How do I respond to these? How do I live with them? How do I work with them?"

A story. Let me see.

He came in the evening after my children were asleep, slipping over my fence into the backyard, tapping quietly on the sliding glass door. The first time he arrived this way, I reached for my baseball bat. Then I saw who it was.

"It's so I won't ruin your reputation," he explained. He knew the neighbors would gossip about a married woman who entertained a man in her home while her husband was overseas in the military. There was no way to explain our unusual friendship to my proper, church-going neighbors, who watched approvingly during the day as I mowed the grass, washed the car, put up the screens. "You manage so well," they said.

This rental house in suburban California was just a temporary home. I intended to go back to college as soon as I could. Whether my husband would be included in these plans was still up in the air—he'd been repeatedly unfaithful, and we'd been unhappy for years.

My friend, too, was on the brink of making a life-changing decision. While he and I folded my little girl's laundry, emptied the dishwasher, cooked dinner, we talked for hours about the lives we'd chosen, our secret dreams. He spent Halloween with my girls and me, carrying the flashlight while the kids went trick-or-treating. Thanksgiving, he carved the turkey. My girls missed their father, and this kind, respectful man listened to them, laughed with them, read them stories.

One night, my next-door neighbor saw my friend arriving through the backyard, and he forbade his wife to speak to me after that. Then my across-the-street neighbor snubbed me at the supermarket—she'd obviously been talked to.

I wish there were a way to explain that I had decided to get a divorce and would soon be going back to college on a scholarship. Or that my friend was a Catholic priest who had spent the last twenty years in a monastery and now intended to leave the priesthood and live openly as a gay man.

How do we understand one another? We are so quick to judge other people. And of course we judge ourselves too—we can be so harsh on ourselves.

Perhaps when we quiet the mind and open the heart, when we begin to practice in the way that we do, the most important thing is that we can begin to listen. Listen to ourselves, but also listen to others—however they voted, wherever they live, whatever they look like—to their fears and hopes and concerns and vulnerability and tenderness and humanity.

Because it's our common humanity. That famous poem from Thich Nhat Hanh, "Call Me by My True Names," that everyone knows: "I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond, and I am the grass snake that silently feeds itself on the frog. I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks, and I am the arms merchant selling deadly weapons to Uganda. I am all of these." When I see this, he says, please call me by my true names, so that I can hear my cries and laughter at once, so that my joys and pain become one, so that I can wake up and open the door of my heart, the door of compassion.

So it's not like it's somebody else. It's humanity. It's us. And we're born into this. This is our family. We begin to listen. We begin to pay attention with respect. And then somehow, as we quiet ourselves and steady the heart, we have to live or stand up for what is true, what we know to be true in the deepest way in ourselves.

The word Dharma means truth, means the universal law. It's not like you have to become a Buddhist—spare your friends and family. It's the Dharma as that which is the way things are in this world. And that Dharma says hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. That Dharma says, in the face of fear and questions about immigration, or healthcare, or Black Lives Matter, or the poorest people, or Muslims, that every human being is born with an innate dignity and Buddha nature. And each one is a worthy being, every single one. That Dharma says that hatred and greed and ignorance lead to suffering. Not even a lot of judgment about it, just a cool analysis. This is how it works. And the opposites—generosity, love, care, wisdom, clarity—lead to well-being. What will you practice?

We are each endowed with the capacity to awaken. Said the Buddha, "If it were not possible for you to awaken, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible for you to live a life with dignity and care and compassion, the great heart of compassion that's born in you, because it is possible for you, I teach you how to do so." And this is really what he called the great miracle of all—that this is born into us as human beings, individually and collectively.

In the last year of his life, there's a whole compendium of his final teachings. He was asked about a wise society. I've read this at other times in the last year or two, because it was something I got to read at the first Buddhist White House Leadership Gathering a year and a half ago or so. I'm not sure how many more there will be right now. Leave that aside.

But the Buddha was asked about a wise society in particular. And he responded—this was to a chief minister; he talked to kings and ministers and princes and cabinet members. And he said, here's the question: Do the members of that community meet regularly in harmony, discuss and depart in harmony, and treat one another respectfully? If so, then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Do they follow and honor the wisdom and traditions of their elders in the past? Do they tend and care for the natural world around them? Do they care for the women, the children, and the most vulnerable among them? Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Do they foster mindfulness and loving kindness in their society? Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline.

Injustice, racism, war—they're not something new. And they're the source of enormous suffering. But they're not the end of the story. They are not. As Mark Twain said, kindness is the language the deaf can hear and the blind can see. And the end of the story is that it's possible for us as human beings to transform our own heart and mind. And we come together in that spirit.

You look up here at these images, these statues. There were no Buddha images for five hundred years. The Buddha didn't want any statues. And the only images there were was a wheel or a deer or some kind of nature images, a tree. The very first images of the Buddha looked like Apollo. They were copies of Greek gods, but with a little bit of a Buddhist twang to them or something like that. But this one, which comes from Thailand, the one that's behind me—there's Quan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, behind Trudy, has her back there. And the Buddha that's behind me has one hand, his right hand down, touching the earth, which is a symbol of the night of enlightenment seated under the Bodhi tree when the Buddha, in the myth or the story...

vowed to sit there and not move until he had awakened to the freedom beyond all space and time. One of those little vows.

And then he was attacked by the armies of Mara. Mara being, in the Indian mythology, the god who represents all the struggles and difficulties that there are in the world. Mara came in the form of temptations—every possible temptation—and Mara came in the form of aggression. Spears and arrows and flaming arrows. And each time, the Buddha would simply raise his hand and touch the weapons that came at him with the heart of compassion, and they would turn to flower petals and drop at his feet.

And finally Mara said, "By what right do you have to sit here and awaken?" So the last of the difficulties was doubt. The doubt of yourself. What right do you have, in this earthly human realm, to awaken?

And then the Buddha reached down, in the story, the myth as it's told, and said, "The earth is my witness." The earth is my witness that I have dedicated this life—and if one likes the bigger story, many, many lives—to compassion, to patience, to care for another, to truthfulness, to integrity, to steadiness of heart. The earth is my witness that it is the possibility and the birthright of human beings to awaken.

And with that, the goddess of the earth, as the myth is told, rose up, and out of her hair came this great shower of water, this great waterfall that washed Mara and the armies of Mara away. And then the Buddha sat very peacefully until the morning star appeared, just there on the horizon, and then he was awakened. Something like that.

So when I say, as we sit, that you sit under your own Bodhi tree—you have Mara. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "No Mara, no Buddha," right? You need Mara. Mara is part of the plot. Mara is in there. But Mara invites you to touch the earth, to say, "Yes, I see you, Mara. I see who you are. I see this." And to trust that there is another reality in your own heart that is vast, that is beyond the forces of Mara.

And what we learn and practice in the most beautiful way is to trust. It doesn't mean every sitting or every week of practice is glorious. Sometimes it's not. It hurts and you're doubting and you're judging and you do all the kind of weird things you do in there. I know you do. You look good, but it's not, you know...

I tell the story of meeting this man in the Miami airport who came up to me. I was traveling to some retreat, and he said, "Jack, is that you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Do you remember? I sat the three-month retreat with you in 1982." I kind of vaguely remembered him. He said, "Well, I feel like I was a kind of failed student because I practiced for a while and then I built a business and I had a couple of kids and I got involved in all kinds of other things, and I didn't meditate. I really felt after some years that I'd fallen away, that I was a failure."

He said, "But last year I had a heart attack. And as I was being wheeled into surgery on the gurney and getting prepped—it all came back to me. I knew how to steady myself. I knew how to come to my breath. I knew how to make space for the fear and all the things. It was amazing. It was all there." He said, "So I thought I was a failure, but thank you."

I'm sorry to say, it's too late for you. The fact that you've come into this room today means that some part of you—that knows it's possible to live in an awake and compassionate and free way—has already started to awaken. And, you know, too bad. It's in you. It's happening. So there's something that you can trust.

But it's not just a personal trust in some way. There's also something much deeper. Deena Metzger, poet friend, writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

And there are these vast cycles of time as well as the limited ones. So Gandhi says, "When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. Yes, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always, always."

And so sometimes what's needed is both a trust in your own heart and also a trust in the broader cycles of humanity. We have less slavery than we did one hundred and two hundred and three hundred years ago.

It's getting less and less and less. And even though women are not treated as they should be in many places and parts of the world, still it has improved over the centuries. And even though there are children who are badly treated, still the lot of children has gotten better and better. And it goes up and down, and there are all these cycles. But it's something that we are learning that's possible for us.

There's this beautiful story that Barbara Kingsolver tells of the Lorai people in the mountains of Central Asia. They're nomadic people, and they were about to come down with their herds from the high mountains. Fall was coming. One of the young children, a ten-year-old, was in charge of taking care of the little ones. She turned away—somehow she had her little flock of children—and all of a sudden one of the boys, a toddler of sixteen or eighteen months who had just learned to walk, disappeared. She ran all over and couldn't find him, then ran back to the village calling out, "I can't find him! Is he back here? Did he come back?" No one had seen him. They all got upset and started looking. They looked under everything, in every house. The parents were, as you can imagine, completely alarmed. It got dark. They couldn't find the child. They got their lights and looked as best as they could.

The next morning they went and looked further, and then someone said they'd heard there was a bear in the vicinity the day before. Everyone got frightened. The men of the village got themselves ready, took some torches, and went up into the woods. How could he walk so far? Maybe something happened to him. In the trees above there was a series of caves. It was the third or fourth or tenth cave—they were searching, nobody knows—and they heard a voice. A cry. A child. They looked into the darkness and ominously smelled bear. But the boy was in there crying, alive.

They moved in the half-light of the cave and saw this animal against the wall. A huge, thick-furred she-bear. And then they saw the child. With sounds and gestures and fiery torches, they somehow scared the bear out of the cave. They rushed in praising Allah and grabbed the child.

Kingsolver says, "I've searched for more of the story, what happened to the bear, but I can go no further because I don't read Arabic or Farsi or their language. But this is not a mistake. It's not a hoax. It happened. The baby was found with the bear in the den. He was alive, unscarred, and perfectly well after two and a half days—and well-fed, smelling of milk." The bear was nursing the child.

So what does this mean? How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than tear him into food? But she was a mammal, a mother. She was lactating, so she might have lost her own young somewhere. And so she was driven by the pure quality of maternity to take this small, warm neonate to her belly and hold him there gently.

You could read this story and declare it impossible, even though many witnesses swore it was true. Or you could read this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places—and think of the unconquerable force of a mother's love. The fact of the DNA code that we share in great majority with other mammals. You could think of all that and say, "Of course the bear nursed the baby. He was crying from hunger, she had milk—small wonder."

There is something in us that is designed to care for one another. We can lose sight of it in big systems, in political ways and economic ways, and it can be quite destructive, as it has been over history.

But there's something even deeper than that, which is the love that connects us—this earth and human beings together. And this is really what's trustworthy.

So we're in the time of the solstice and the turning of the seasons. Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa. And the mythology is that the humans help the sun come back by lighting your candles, by celebrating in the way that you do. You somehow invite out of the darkness the light to begin to return.

And archetypally, humans are called the make-weight. Remember those scales, the way people used to measure things? There would be a balance scale with weights you'd put on one side, and then you'd weigh whatever the commodity was on the other. If you see the fancy sets of weights, they're little turtles or rabbits or animals all made out of some heavy metal. Well, it turns out the scales of the universe are closely balanced between good and evil, between creation and destruction. And in this mythological way of understanding, human beings are one of those little weights—but we're the little weight that when it's placed on one side of the scale or the other is the one that tips the balance.

And so that is what's given to you from Mary Oliver, our great poet laureate. She writes about the Buddha's last instructions:

I think of the Buddha every morning as the east begins to tear off its clouds of darkness and send up a signal white fan streaked with pink and violet. An old man, he laid down between the two sal trees. He might have said anything knowing it was his final hour. Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen. No doubt he thought of

everything that had happened in his difficult life. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head and looked into the face of that frightened crowd. "Make of yourself a light," he said. As his last words: make of yourself a light.

And so in this time of solstice, in this turning of the seasons, you are invited to become that light that shines in the world. Whatever your background or views or wherever you come from, you can carry something beautiful into this world. And it's said that not in the sky, nor in the midst of the ocean, nor the highest mountain cave can one escape the consequences of one's deeds. And not in the sky or the mid-ocean or the highest mountains will the seeds that are planted fail to bear fruit. If you plant beautiful seeds—if you plant something even in the season of no light, in the darkness—if you plant the bulbs and the seeds and tend them as we do, something beautiful will come.

To quiet ourselves and to sit together and to reflect in this way, it's not a grim duty. It's really a joy—what seeds you will plant.

I want to welcome you all and welcome myself to being here. This is my first time teaching in this beautiful new hall, and I actually haven't taught this Monday night for many years. So it's a pleasure to be here and to be here with Jack and all of you.

When I was listening to Jack talk about those little weights that are us, the humans, that can tip the balance one way or another, I was thinking about what I wanted to share with you tonight. Somebody came up and asked me if I'd had a lot of travels. I said yes. And he said, did you take Jack with you? And I said yes—we went together to Maui to teach with Ram Dass in beautiful Hawaii.

But before that, I was in Africa, in the heart of Africa, and I didn't take Jack with me on this trip. It was not a very safe trip at all. I was in eastern Chad. Chad, if you don't know exactly where it is, is really right in the middle of the continent—Nigeria, Niger, Libya, Sudan, Cameroon, Central African Republic. Anyway, it's right in the middle.

And I was in a Darfuri refugee camp called Gozamir, which is less than an hour from Darfur, from Sudan. There's just a highway—actually just a big, wide dirt road, not even passable in the rainy season—which is the highway to Sudan.

The juxtaposition of going from working and being in a place like this to being at the retreat in Maui with so much—this buffet full of so much food, like here at Spirit Rock. Electricity, running water, Wi-Fi, air conditioning if you need it, fans—just comfort piled upon comfort piled upon comfort. We take all this for granted. And to be in a place where we just didn't have comforts like that, where we never knew what to expect.

We were staying in a little UN compound with lots of barbed wire and guards. It's not a safe place at all where we were. We couldn't stay in the camp. But there was no reliable anything. So we were so grateful for the trickle of water, or the times when the air conditioning worked before it went off again. The heat was so intense.

And yet, we were there to teach mindfulness to the preschool teachers and the soccer coaches.

They're all young people. They're all totally traumatized. Because anybody over the age of fifteen—well, thirteen really—has seen, has witnessed unspeakable atrocities, or had them done to them.

Mindfulness, I kept thinking when I would have moments of doubt—as Jack was talking about, doubt is the slipperiest of those hindrances to our being fully present—I would wonder, mindfulness is not at the top of the hierarchy of needs here. How can we help? But it turns out that we really were able to help.

And the first way is through what we're all practicing here: the ability to be very simply present, to be attentive, to listen. We've listened to ourselves enough that we know how to listen to others with a little less judgment, a little more compassion. And it turns out—and we all know this—that being the recipient of that kind of attention, attention that is interested and fully present... infants have sonar for this. They fuss when you're not there. Children would rather have terrible attention than none at all.

So it turns out that our just bearing witness and listening to people's stories, and obviously being moved by their stories—and they knew we cared enough. It takes a long time to get there. You have to travel in these little humanitarian planes, and you land on dirt airstrips, and you have to listen to the plane voice, which is female even though the pilots are male, saying as you get close to the ground, "Terrain, terrain, pull up, pull up." And you're thinking, I know African pilots are so skilled, but is there an airstrip? Which you don't know until the last minute if it's your first flight.

So it turns out that our ability to be interested, our simple loving presence, counts for a lot. And teaching people how to bring their minds back from, say, a flashback—because traumatized people are constantly having flashbacks. Some of you unfortunately know this from your own experience. To be able to bring the mind back to the simple

reality of what's here—we don't go inside, but we look at just what's here: the touch points of the body with the chair, what we see, what we hear in the present moment, the fact that we're being quiet and all of us are together. We come to this moment and we're safe for now.

Nobody there can tell their children, "Now you're safe." Because they're not, for sure. They're safe for now. And in some way, that's how we all are, right? We're safe for now.

And as we mature, all of us, in our practice of mindfulness and compassion, we just can't see the world the way we used to, maybe, when we were able to ignore more of reality. We really see that when one person is hungry, we're not separate from that hungry person. When one person is homeless, we feel that. When one person is a refugee, we're not separate from the refugees.

And I feel that—and I think you do too, or you wouldn't be here—a part of us is then hungry, a part of us is homeless, a part of us is also a refugee. And we realize more and more our intimate connection, our belonging to life. Just like the breeze belongs to the wind or a wave belongs to the ocean, we belong to life. And when we belong and feel our belonging to the world in this way, how can we not want to be of benefit in some way? To be that little weight that tips the balance.

And obviously not everybody is called to travel that far and go someplace like that. I felt very fortunate to have met these people and fallen in love with this small team and decided to join them. But I kept feeling while I was in the camp: if everybody did one small thing, we wouldn't have hunger in the world. We wouldn't have all these refugees. If we all, whatever according to our talents or skills or interests or affections or karmic affinities, could find one small thing to do.

Whatever you do, we all belong to life, and we can all express our love and the goodness of our practice in some small way.

One of the great joys of being there was teaching the teachers some games. I want to give a shout out to my friend Susan Kaiser Greenland. She wrote a book called *The Mindful Child*, and her second book, called *Mindful Games*, had just come out at Thanksgiving. She very generously let us use some of the games she teaches for kids before the book had even been published, so we could share them with the teachers and coaches to use with the children in their classes.

You have to understand that for these young teachers and young coaches, just to be able to play is so much fun. There aren't that many opportunities for them to play. The young women, most of them have babies. They go home and have to somehow make whatever food there is last, grind whatever flour there is, carry water. So much time

spent hauling water—huge containers on their heads, swinging their arms and walking so gracefully and elegantly with these enormous bidons of water balanced above them. I said I wanted to learn how to do it, and our translator said, "You can't. You are not strong enough. You can't."

One of the games we taught was a kind of icebreaker at the beginning of a class. You could picture us playing it—we'd be sitting in one big circle with a ball. The kids don't have balls, but we had brought balls for the classrooms and for the soccer coaches. We chose games that didn't require any props, not even a raisin, because you don't have anything there. We would roll the ball across the circle, and then you mindfully report what's happening in your mind, what's happening in your body.

So I would roll the ball to someone—say Zaynab—and she would say, "My mind is happy, but my body has a fever." Then she would roll the ball across to somebody else, maybe Fatima, who would say, "My mind is happy, but my body is tired and achy." It went on like this. Almost everybody reported that they were happy to be there—happy. But they also reported that they had fevers, that they had malaria. And there they were, showing up to teach the kids every day. So much resilience and so much grace.

I found it inspiring. It really helped me think of days when I wake up and don't feel like doing something, even though I'm fine. You know those days. We have those days. And it turns out nobody there has seven days in a row of feeling well, because nobody has enough to eat. I asked the interpreter, "How can they go and teach? How can they show up in the morning with all these kids?" And he said, "Well, we have to, because nobody has seven days in a row of feeling well. That doesn't happen because there isn't enough food." And because if you get malaria, you have to have money to be able to get medicine.

One of our teachers said in the circle, "This summer I was so happy. I was given the gift of twin girls born to me. I fell in love with them. I was so happy. And then in the fall, they got malaria and they died." She said, "And my happiness went away."

This is preventable. This is curable. This doesn't need to be happening anywhere in the world.

I felt so much sadness at times, and yet so much gratitude that we could be there. The children who are in the programs get some food. They look so different from the other children in the camp. And they have such a fair, equitable system of choosing who gets to be in these classes. The classes, with the support of people like you and me, are going to grow. The program is called Little Ripples, and it's going to ripple out and

spread to other camps. Other refugee camps are interested. They want to know: What about mindfulness with refugee populations? What about preschools that are refugee-led, that aren't brought in from outside? What about this?

For me, I felt no separation. I would look at a little girl in her frayed, raggedy pink dress and become that child. That's what our practice allows us to do. Sometimes it's called exchanging self for other. But we can really listen deeply and have some sense of what it is like to be each other.

Again, it's that simple presence. And in that presence, in that melting away of separation, there's just the little girl, the intense psychedelic heat around us, the flies that come to drink at the corners of your eyes where it's moist, or try to get up in the nostrils where there might be a little moisture too. And all of it so vivid and bright and so sacred, really—to witness this different kind of human life in this different kind of place and wonder, how can we even be in the same world? How is it possible that we are sharing a world where we could be one moment amid such beautiful, beautiful affluence in nature in Hawaii, and knowing all the while that the refugees are still there? They're still there, living this very difficult, challenging life, responding to every bit of loving awareness and loving attention and interest that tells them they haven't been completely forgotten—even though Darfur is no longer in the news and the international community hasn't made it safe for anyone to go home.

It's not possible to fully comprehend. But I've been reminding myself, and reminding Jack, and everywhere that I go.

Let me just tell a quick story. We taught the teachers the games, and at the end we had a contest. They had to divide into teams, and their job was to play the games in such a way that showed they understood the mindfulness principles behind each exercise. They chose the names for their teams: the Lions and the Intelligent People.

Each team took turns demonstrating the exercises we had taught, and it was beautiful. In the end, the Lions won. They had a more competitive spirit—they were hiding their discussions and deliberations from the Intelligent People. The Intelligent People sighed. They were a little dismayed, but they accepted it with grace. They truly did.

This happened right around the time of the election. I was there when it occurred, and the Africans were worried about what the consequences would be for them. Will they still get funding? Will they still receive food? What will this mean for them? They laughed at our shock and dismay because they said, "You know, we've had leaders like

this—leaders like what this might be. We don't know." They kind of laughed at our dismay, but ruefully. And then they reminded us, "Your country is not Sudan. Your leader is not al-Bashir." This is a good thing to be reminded of.

The Intelligent People—some of us consider ourselves, with our vote, the intelligent people—we were very dismayed when we lost the contest. Whatever side of this election you were on, whatever way you felt called to cast your vote, and however you feel about the results, from the perspective of our mindfulness and our loving awareness, whatever unmasks what we need to learn, whatever unmasks our own biases and prejudices, whatever shows us where we were deluded and unclear—this is actually something to be welcomed and learned from.

I was struck—of course it was just a fun contest—but I was struck with the graciousness and grace of the refugees at every step of the way. I felt we have so much to learn.

May we include in our loving awareness everyone who needs care and protection. And all the parts of ourselves. For decades I practiced Zen, and we have these vows to be helpers in the world, to be that weight that tips the world toward goodness, even though we never know exactly the results of our actions. We hold that intention to tip the weight that way.

The first line of these vows is: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all"—that's the usual translation. But another translation is: "I vow to free them all." And that means freeing the many beings who reside in our own hearts.

How do we free them? We free them by allowing them to be as they are, who they are. Think of what a freedom that would be for each other. Genocides would never happen. The people in Darfur wouldn't have been killed and persecuted for the color of their skin, which is darker than the northern Muslims who essentially conquered them or drove them out of their land. To be able to free each other to be just as we are, to be able to accept all of who we are in loving awareness—this is our work in the practice.

I'm always so inspired by people—all of you, people who come to our center, InsightLA in Los Angeles, who come to practice and to grow the capacity to love, to grow in wisdom and compassion. I'm always inspired, and I thank you. I thank you for your practice, for whatever you're doing to cherish and protect the earth and your life and the people around you. Really, thank you for that. Because we all belong in this clear wakefulness, this vivid experience of presence in the reality that we share.

So thank you for listening. Thank you for allowing me to be here with your beloved Jack. I'd love to share my beloved with you. And I'm really happy to get to teach with you tonight.

What I'd like us to do as a follow-up, and a way to conclude the evening, is to offer—voluntarily, for those who wish—that we create blessing cords for the solstice and the year ahead. You can take a red or a gold, or if you're desperate you can take both.

While they get passed around, let me talk about what it means to create what's called a blessing or protection cord. I have one that I've worn for a long time, one I received from the Dalai Lama. And it's a beautiful thing to—

If you have lots of clumps, maybe spread them out so other people can pass them on too, because there's lots of you.

And don't put them on yet—we have to create them. There's a little ritual that we'll do for those who want to.

Across Asia, certainly across Buddhist Asia—what had been the Buddhist temples in Afghanistan all the way through India and China and Japan and so forth—the thread is used as a symbol of the sacred. It's used in wedding ceremonies, it's used in rituals that bring people together, and it's used in healing ceremonies. It's considered to be the thread that weaves through all of life. So it's a symbol of the sacred that we live with.

And the reason that it has this color, the gold or the red color, is that it's considered to be one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun. So that when you go into the marketplace, you're wearing your robes—basically you're a monk or a nun in drag, you know, going into the marketplace. And you remember that your real home is in the temple.

As I tell most of the time in doing this little ritual, having done a blessing cord ceremony with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tibetan Lama, many years ago, somebody raised their hand and they said, "These are also called protection cords. What exactly do they protect you from?" And he said, "Why, yourself, of course"—which is the main protection that human beings need.

So we'll tie three knots into them, and then there's a ritual way to tie them on around your wrist or wherever you like. And we'll talk about the three knots.

If you hold your cord, the first knot is the knot of integrity and non-harming. From the Buddhist texts it says: Others will be cruel, we shall not be cruel—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will kill living beings, we shall not kill—thus we incline the heart. Others will be greedy, we will not be greedy but generous—thus we will incline the heart. Others will speak maliciously, we will speak truthfully and kindly—thus we will incline the heart. Others will be envious, we will not be envious—thus we incline

the heart. Others will be harsh without compassion, and we shall establish compassion—thus we will incline the heart. Others will lack wisdom and mindfulness, we shall cultivate wisdom and presence—thus we will incline the heart.

And so you hold your cord and the first knot to be tied is the knot of your commitment to not harm other living beings and to not harm yourself. It's really a commitment to care for yourself and to all of life as best as you can.

So take a moment to reflect on that in your own way—what it means to live a life of reverence for life and non-harming of yourself or another. And when you're ready, tie a knot in the center of the cord. That's your commitment: not harm yourself and not harm others, as best as you can.

Then the second knot is a knot of refuge. In the Buddhist tradition, it's refuge in awakening—the awakened mind or heart the Buddha represents. It's refuge in the Dharma of speaking truth, of seeing what's true. Refuge in Sangha and community. But it can be refuge in whatever you consider sacred or holy. This is the place, when you have to make a decision, when things really come down to how to live, that you go for the deepest refuge.

So hold your cord and reflect on what is the refuge of that which is sacred and holy for you. When you're ready, tie a knot in the center of the cord.

And the third and last knot is the knot of your intention, which is particularly helpful and important in the time of the solstice and the new year, the turning of the year and the return of the light. As Trudy said, there is the bodhisattva vows: Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to free them all.

The Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and takes the Shantideva version: May I be a lamp or a light to illuminate those who are lost in the darkness. May I be food for the hungry. May I be medicine for those who are sick.

May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for those who would cross the flood. May I be a resting place for the weary. And may I do so as long as earth and sky exist, as long as the galaxy exists, until all are liberated together. Some nice little vow like that.

A friend, Diane Ackerman, puts it in a very poetic, simple way. She says: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

So before you tie the third knot, take a moment to reflect on your heart's intention, setting the compass of the heart. It could be as simple as: I vow to be kind to myself and others. What would your vow be? What would your sacred intention be as we go into this time of darkness and plant the seeds for something new to be born and the light to return?

When you have a sense of what very simple intention would turn the compass of your heart in the direction of the deepest and most beautiful vow you can make, tie the third knot into the cord, which holds that intention.

Now your blessing cord, your protection cord, is fully activated. If you want to wear it around your neck, as some do, put it around the back of your neck and let the two ends hang down—don't tie it on yet. If you want to wear it around your wrist, wrap it two or three times around your wrist and let the ends hang down. If you don't want to wear it, you can simply put it in your pocket.

But if you want to wear it for a little while as a reminder of your robes and the perfume of the temple that you carry, I ask that you turn to a person seated next to you or near you and silently tie on their blessing cord—not too tight, not too loose. As you do, give them a silent blessing. And they will tie yours on. If you don't have a second person, you can do it in threes. Just find someone seated near you. It's a beautiful thing—you're tying on blessings and receiving them.

Lastly, before we go tonight: in India, when you meet someone, the most common greeting is to put your hands together in a gesture of respect and say *namaste*, which means "I honor the divine within you." I see the secret beauty, the spirit that was born into you. The root of the word *namaste* is, in Sanskrit and Pali, the word *namo*, which begins most Buddhist texts. It means to bow to, or pay respects, or honor.

I want us to chant *namo* nine times. As you do, feel what it is that you've dedicated yourself to in your blessing protection cord. Sense the spirit of those around you. Bow to the earth as a protector of all life in whatever way seems right to you. And imagine, as you offer these nine *namos*, that you're also offering a bow to whatever matters to you, or whoever needs support, or whoever needs love in this world.

Namo. Namo. Namo.

Namo. Namo. Namo.

Namo. Namo.

One more.

Namo.

May the harmony of our words and song together in *namo*, this gesture of respect, spread from ourselves to one another and across the earth, so that our words and deeds join as seeds, as beautiful waves, as something that spreads from us to bring blessings and care, respect and dignity to all life.

May it be so. And may you all have a wonderful solstice, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Year, Hanukkah—happy everything.

Thank you, and good night.

CHAPTER 6

The Generous Heart (Drop-in at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · 1h02

> *In this opening talk of a year-long series on the inner perfections (pāramī), Jack Kornfield illuminates generosity (dāna) as a fundamental path to liberation and happiness. Drawing from the traditional Buddhist framework of dāna-sīla-bhāvanā—generosity, virtue, and mental cultivation—he presents giving not as moral obligation but as a practice that naturally arises from recognizing our interconnectedness and abundance.*
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> *Kornfield shares the mythological story of the Bodhisattva's vow upon meeting Dīpaṅkara Buddha, illustrating how the perfections are cultivated over countless lifetimes. He describes the three levels of giving in Buddhist teaching: tentative giving, brotherly or sisterly giving, and royal giving—where one offers from such inner fullness that nothing feels like sacrifice. Through moving personal stories, including his experiences as a monk receiving alms in Southeast Asian villages and accompanying his daughter to welcome refugees at the airport, he demonstrates how generosity connects us to something greater than our fearful, separate selves.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for engaging with difficult times while maintaining an open heart. Kornfield emphasizes that true generosity includes oneself—compassion must be circular to be complete. Whether caring for a sick brother, donating a kidney to a student, or simply being present with one's humanity, the teaching invites listeners to remember their noble nature: 'O nobly born, remember who you really are.' This is not about perfecting personality but about stepping out of the body of fear into the vast, universal heart that is our birthright.*

So, let yourself quiet down. Sit at ease and let yourself listen.

There's a lot of excitement in the room tonight. It's wonderful.

And as you listen, again, as I said before, it's not particularly that you have to remember anything. There's no quiz, no grades. You really want to listen to see if something rings true in your own heart, in your own experience, that's of value. It's really a reminder of something. And it gives you, as you listen, just as we sat together in silence for a bit, a chance to do your own inner reflection.

Tonight I'd like to start a series of teachings over this year by talking about the generous heart.

In these demanding times there is, in a simple way, a call for medicine—medicine of healing. Healing of the spirit and the heart, healing of the community, and healing of the earth. Just as Spirit Rock offers itself as one form of sanctuary, the deeper sanctuary, of course, is the inner sanctuary that we find, the inner garden.

It's an interesting thing, actually. I was teaching, working with some peace groups in Palestine and Israel some years ago. I did a whole big benefit and raised a bunch of money for teachers to be offering these teachings in Arabic, in the Arabic community. One of the teachers, a new teacher that I was counseling and working with—I talked about how there's this wonderful tradition of going up in the mountains or going out to some holy place, and it must be beautiful. There must be some tradition where you can speak about going out in the desert and listening in some deep way.

And he said, no, no, no, I tried that. That's actually a kind of banishment. He said when he tried to talk to people about going out in the desert and listening, apparently that's considered more of a punishment. So he was not sure what the right image was to use for meditation.

As we talked further, what came from him was the walled garden—you know, in the Sultan's court or at the oasis. There's this beautiful walled garden that everyone has within them, a beautiful garden that they can tend and listen to. That was the language. You have to find your language for what is your own sanctuary.

The medicine of the Dharma—Dharma is a Sanskrit word that means truth, the path of awakening, teachings; it has multiple meanings. One of the most fundamental descriptions of Buddhist teachings is *dana sila bhavana*, which is the Buddhist recipe for human happiness. *Dana* means generosity, which we'll talk about tonight. *Sila* means virtue or honesty or living a life of integrity. And *bhavana* means the cultivation of the mind and heart in a wise way. So it's outer and inner.

Yesterday I went with my daughter to the airport to join in with a couple of thousand people at the international part of SFO. She's a young immigration lawyer, an asylum lawyer, so she was part of a group of young lawyers making themselves available to families of people who'd been detained or other people who were worried. There was a group of them, some who spoke Arabic and Farsi and all kinds of translators, and that part was great. Then there were these different demonstrations with, as you can imagine, very creative signs of all different kinds, and lots of chanting—literally a couple of thousand people.

My favorite, actually—there would be groups of three hundred or five hundred people here or there in the terminal—was one where people were chanting. There was a whole series of different chants. One of the chants was: "No ban, no fear, refugees are welcome here."

My favorite one had a really good jazz band in the middle, a brass jazz band, New Orleans style, with trombone and trumpet and saxophone. They'd start to chant, "No ban, no fear, refugees are welcome here," and the drummer would kick off, and then the sax would come in. Even the cops were smiling. They were trying to contain it, but the police were actually very good. There were some rowdy people too, as there always is. But there was some feeling that it wasn't just a demonstration against something, but that there was some love in it, some artistry, that there was something bigger, some joy that was being carried—that this is who we are.

The signs and the things that were most moving were not against something, but they were proclaiming that which we know to be noble and beautiful.

Now, I don't want to continue tonight to talk about politics. One could, but one wants to turn off the news as well. Nor do I assume that everyone in this room has a particular political view. People voted all kinds of ways and in all kinds of directions. So I want to talk about something deeper that I believe comes from the teachings of the Dharma, or the best of the Buddhist teachings, something that nourishes the heart and the community, whatever your particular political view or your particular orientation—something that's more universal.

But I do have to remind you: last year in the spring, when there was all this talk about the fear of refugees from Syria, I asked in a Monday class, a couple of times actually, how many people would seriously consider taking a Syrian woman, or a woman and children, into their home for a year to help them get settled here. A hundred hands went up, and I took a picture of it.

And I sent it to President Obama and Secretary of State, and to a whole bunch of them, to Dianne Feinstein and so forth, saying, you know, I want you to understand that there are people who aren't afraid.

I also need to let you know that the NSA now knows who you are. But they've known who you are for a long time, so you don't have to worry about it.

But whatever your political point of view or your orientation, what I want to speak about tonight as the beginning of this series is the teachings on Buddha nature. They're sometimes described as the inner perfections. And what they talk about is what is innate in us—that we can awaken to, that we can carry and honor the life that we've been given.

And so I'll tell some stories, which are stories of human possibility and the great possibility of happiness and freedom and generosity and liberation and joy for each person, no matter what your circumstances. And maybe in a way, the stories and the teachings also can help break the spell of fear, the small sense of self, the sense of separateness—that when we feel really separate gets guided by fear or rage or revenge or those kinds of things.

And this is in that way a really radical teaching. It shifts us away from me first, or us first, or greed or hatred—not because those things are bad, it's not a judgmental teaching—but simply because those don't lead to happiness. And the teachings of the Dharma, Buddhist teachings, fundamentally are teachings of the possibility of human happiness for us individually and for us collectively. On this earth.

So here's an old story. Long ago, when you were much, much younger than you are now, there was a Buddha previous to Siddhartha Gautama named Dipankara Buddha. He was supposed to have been a being of great radiance and beauty and tremendous generosity and love, and he affected everyone that he encountered. And so the Buddha that we teach about or talk about, the historical Buddha of 2,500 to 2,600 years ago, in this story met this previous Buddha and was so taken by the beauty of this heart and this being that he said, "I will do whatever it takes to become like him, to become like this." And he made a vow that however long it takes, he too would come to this great possibility of liberation and love that he now saw human beings could embody.

And then it took him, as is true for Buddhas in these stories of mythology, a while. The description of "a while" is called 100,000 Mahakalpas and Four Immensities. And a Mahakalpa, one Mahakalpa, is this: there's a mountain as high as Mount Vepula, a little higher than Mount Everest. And every hundred years, a bird drags a silk scarf across the top of the mountain, wearing it away a tiny bit. And when that Mount Everest-sized mountain is worn down by this silk scarf, that's one Mahakalpa. So we're talking time here.

And over those 100,000 Mahakalpas and the four immensities, the Buddha-to-be—all of us as Buddhas-to-be—practiced generosity, compassion, patience, steadfastness, wisdom, loving-kindness, truthfulness, all the great virtues of the heart, again and again and again, until they had become fully realized.

There are two wonderful huge volumes of stories of the past lives of the Buddha. Whether one believes them or not, they're kind of the mythological tales, like the fairy tales of India—when the Buddha was born as the king of the deer, or as an elephant king, or a tiger. Many of them are animal fables, and they're extraordinary ones.

The ones about generosity, which I'll talk about tonight—there was the Buddha who was born as a rabbit. There was a great yogi in the mountains who was practicing, about to achieve some deep enlightenment but who hadn't eaten for a long time. The rabbit felt so moved by the dedication of this yogi that he threw himself into the fire to offer food for the yogi. That's the kind of excessive generosity of these stories.

I remember being at Mother Teresa's in Calcutta several times to volunteer. There was a sign in one place that the younger nuns had put up. The sign said, "Mother says, let them eat you up." And it's kind of stunning, because when you're in circumstances of great difficulty or great suffering, often the inner protective part wants us to pull back—which has its place. I'm not saying you should all get eaten up, not yet anyway. But this was like the tales of the Buddha: Mother says, let them eat you up. No matter what is needed, you offer yourself. So that's the kind of tales these come from.

And whoever dedicates themselves in the way that this great being, the Buddha to be, did, is called a Bodhisattva. Someone dedicated to bringing awakening to fulfillment in this world. Whatever happens, no matter the political changes, the civilizations that rise and fall, the empires and so forth, this is the dedication to generosity and truthfulness and compassion and wisdom and loving kindness that is timeless.

Now, you might hear about this and even though it's a recipe for happiness, it seems a little daunting. How am I going to make myself perfectly generous? It's called perfections—perfectly truthful or perfectly compassionate and so forth. And perfection is really not a good word for it. How am I going to perfect my personality? You've tried that. It didn't work very well. Perfect my body. You've tried that too. It doesn't really work. How about a perfect cleaning job, a perfectly clean car or apartment? Then what happens? A little while later it gets dirty again. Perfection can't be found in that way, in that very limited idea.

And so when you hear these stories, because they're archetypal or mythological—they're not a therapeutic story or a psychological story or a literal story—they don't exist in time. This is really a story about that which is timeless and universal, in all times and in all places. It is available when you step out of the small sense of fear and you step into another reality. Extraordinary powers and extraordinary capacities. The mothers who lift cars off their children. The Chinese man with the shopping bags stand-

ing in front of that whole long row of tanks. That is there in us. And as Martin Luther King said, everybody can be great because everybody can serve. Everybody has it in them to offer something that's beautiful.

Robert Johnson, who was a Jungian analyst and writer, now deceased—he wrote books, little books like *He*, *She*, *We*, Jungian mythological books—he writes about being in India. He says, "I was in India and I got very sick with a fever and great pain over my body, and I could hardly walk. I kept falling down. They took me to a hospital. They must have seen my apprehension as they tried to assure me that they were a very modern facility. 'We have a thermometer,' the nurse reassured me. I found out their one thermometer was passed from one patient to another. In between, they held it under the water faucet just to be safe. My temperature reached 105. And somehow after ten days, I survived."

"While I was hospitalized, I had made a new friend. He came every day to visit me and slept each night on the floor under my bed. Of all my experiences in India for twenty years, this was the most touching. When I was sick, my friend came and slept near me. He said, 'So you wouldn't be frightened or lonely.' Now in America, if I get sick, I can't get anyone to stay with me very long—not to speak of being under my bed—but he slept on the mat there and tended me."

"One day when I was so sick, my new friend Shankar stood at the foot of the bed and said to me, 'Robert, I want to tell you a story about Baba and his friend. Baba's friend got very sick, and Baba came and stood beside him and said to him, only you say the word and I will go to die so that you can live. Robert, for you I am Baba.'"

You have only to say the word and I will die, so you will live.

"Now, that floored me," said Robert. It was like something out of the tale of a thousand and one nights, some fairy tale. How can you hold this? I was shocked by this story. But at least I had the presence of mind to say, "Thank you, Shankar, for this great gift. But please don't do anything rash now. I think I have enough life force that we'll both make it through." And we did. But this was the most astonishing thing that happened to me in all my twenty years of coming and going in India.

There's something in this story, and something in us, that resonates and goes, "Wow." We can really be there for one another. We can be there for this world in a generous way—not because you're supposed to, not because it makes you a better person than somebody else, but because it makes the heart sing, because it makes life come alive, because it brings a deep kind of happiness.

Sometimes these teachings are described as a cultivation or a development or a nurturing, but more deeply they're an invitation to step out of the body of fear, the small sense of self, and reclaim your place, your nobility, of shared compassion in this vast universal heart of ours. "O nobly born," begins the Buddhist text. Remember who you really are.

I have another story, a true story about a man named Sasha Dichter who worked for a large international fund. He was driving home with his family one day—they used to give money to homeless shelters and things like that—when he was struck by a kind of lightning bolt. He realized he'd been making the wrong choice. People would ask him for things, beggars asking for money, people needing help this way or that, and he would give sometimes, and sometimes he wouldn't. In that moment, his heart opened. He said, "I wanted to stop saying no. I needed to break the habit. I decided I was hiding behind some discrimination."

So he made this decision on the spot: for the next month, he would only say yes to whatever anybody requested. Beggars, nonprofits, street musicians, mail solicitations—they would all get a yes. Now it happened to be December, so he got an endless stream of year-end appeals. Friends warned him he'd better be cautious, giving money to strangers who might use it on drugs or alcohol. But for the month, he resisted employing this careful scrutiny. Instead, he said, "We can't know the results of what we do." And he learned that the smartest philanthropists lead with generosity.

He soon discovered that his experiment was never really about donating money. It was a chance to test what it felt like to live with a totally different orientation. It was a commitment to take a door that had been closed by his own taste and open it to whatever came. And it changed his life after that. He's written about it in different ways.

So this is really the invitation, O nobly born, to discover the first of these ten qualities of your own Buddha nature: the generous heart. And it's universal. There's pleasure in it. There's gratitude that you have things to offer. And we have so much, really.

I remember a friend years ago who'd come out of the Soviet Union when there still was a Soviet Union—those of you who are old enough to remember that—with long bread lines and not much in the stores under that stark communist economic system of the time. They'd come to Marin, come to San Francisco, and a friend took him into a supermarket. He looked around and his jaw dropped. Oh my God, he couldn't believe it, the abundance. And he said, "What is this place? Is this special?" The friend said, "Come with me." They got in the car and drove three blocks away and went into another supermarket. And he stood there and wept.

And he said, "I had no idea that there could be this kind of abundance."

And of course, we take it for granted. You live in enormous abundance, whoever you are in this room. An enormous kind of privilege. But it's not only that kind of abundance—it's also the sunlight and the warmth and, in this case, the safety that you have. You also live with the protection of so many others and goodwill, because they all stop at the red lights when your light is green. They really protect your life. They do. And you protect their lives. They don't go into the market and just grab the goods or grab your money—not very often anyway. You live in a sea of protection and graciousness and tremendous abundance.

So to be generous really means that you begin to feel that already the universe is generous with you. The poet Rumi says, "Walking out of the treasury building, I feel generous. How can anyone be sober in this weather when we've been given so much?"

And you can begin to understand the power of generosity as a practice of liberation. Not because you're supposed to be a good person or something, but because of what it does to the heart and mind. It's really a practice of letting go, of expanding who you are, of trusting in some deep way.

Reflect for a moment, if you will, on someone who has been generous to you. With money or time or love—some benefactor. Someone who's really been generous. Picture them. Think of the ways they've cared. Feel whatever arises.

How does it feel? I experience delight when I think of this person, and gratitude. What does it feel like for you? Love. Warmth. Joy.

Those who are generous are loved. You could feel the love, the joy, the delight—those qualities that come when you think about someone who's been generous to you.

Now, the next reflection is to think of the times that you've been generous to others and how it feels to you. Whether it's supporting another or offering your love and care, in whatever way it was—your assistance, your money, somebody that you really served generously. And generosity means there's a little stretch to it too. Not that you don't want to do it, but that you expand.

And then remember one more thing. Remember or sense the opposite. Sometime when you felt fearful, worried about money, stingy, hoarding, grasping—fess up. You've all done it. We have. I have too. Frightened about it. And what's that feel like in your life?

It's said that there are three levels of giving in the Buddhist teachings. The first is called tentative giving. "Oh, I've got this coat in my closet, I hardly ever wear it anyway. Maybe I should give it away, it takes up space. But yeah, I kind of like it, but I never wear it." Fine, you kind of give it away to somebody. It's still a beautiful thing. It's actually a lovely thing that you did. Even if there's reluctance, that's fine, it doesn't matter.

But then the next level is called brotherly or sisterly giving, in which you say, "They're like me. I have this coat. I have something really nice. You need one? Sure, let's share." And there's a bigger open heart with brotherly or sisterly giving. Let me just offer to you as if you were part of my family—which you are. Since, again, Mother Teresa says the problem is we draw our family circle too small. So you take them into your family.

And then there's what's called royal giving. The giving of the empress or the emperor, the king or the queen, in which you take the best of what you have and you say, "Here, I give this to you because I know what delight it will bring to you." You're so full of well-being and benevolence, you've got the treasure inside that you can give away anything because you're full of abundance. And it's a really beautiful thing to do kingly or queenly giving.

I remember watching the level of generosity when I was a monk living with an alms bowl in some very remote villages in Laos and Thailand and Southeast Asia, parts of Burma. In the dry season, the villages would be very poor out where I was. There wasn't that much to eat. There was rice, and then there was fish that was stored away with chili peppers and things, what they could grow a little bit, but not very much. We used to get curries that were made even from bats or field mice and things like that because that was the meat that had nourishment in it.

But anyway, we'd go through the village. You had to be silent. And people would come out and they would put some of the food that they'd cooked that morning into your bowl. And you couldn't say thank you or anything. You couldn't say, "Oh my God, you gave me a mango! That's like the best thing of the week." Or thank you for whatever you get. You just receive it in silence.

And of course, I was thinking I could always wire home to my mom if I got really hungry, and she'd send me a couple hundred dollars, which was the annual income of a family in this village. These were villages that still weren't wired for electricity, so people wove their own cloth and very much sustained their own lives. Very poor, but they would give with so much love.

And I thought, how can I receive this? How dare I take this from somebody who's hungry when I come from a culture where there's so much abundance? But then I realized how much delight they had in giving it. And also that they weren't just giving it to me, but they were giving it to what I represented—the other monks and nuns who came through. We represented something that they so valued in their culture, which was awakening and compassion and loving-kindness and the liberation taught by the Buddha for thousands of years. They said, "Of the little we have, we want to make sure to support this because it brings joy and light into our whole culture and our whole life." And so here we give this to you.

It wasn't really personal. And yet at the same time, I had to receive it and say, okay, I actually better do this stuff. I can't be a slacker, exactly, because their generosity somehow made me rise to the occasion of being maybe a slightly better monk than I might have been otherwise—best as I could on a good day.

So you can begin to hear not the necessity or the judgment or the duty of generosity, but rather the beauty of it and the joy of it, and why it fits into the mandala of an awakened life, why it is actually central to the teachings of living with a liberated heart and liberated mind. What makes us happy, says the Buddha. Generosity is the first of these aspects of Buddha nature.

And it's a practice, as well as an awakening in you, like the story I read. I took a kind of inner intention, a vow, twenty years ago or so, that if I had a thought to give something, I would do it. Because you think about it, and then there's, "Oh, wait a second, that's too much," or "Maybe I shouldn't," or "I should give to other people," or all the kinds of things our minds do. And I said, if I have a thought to give something, I just do it. There may be an occasion I can think of in these years where I haven't, for whatever reason. But most of the time I've done it, and it's been fantastic. I don't even have to think about it. If the thought comes, I just do it.

I also love to give things to homeless people and people on the streets. If somebody is a vet, somebody who's mentally ill, somebody who's lost their home, somebody who can't make it, whose body is hurting—maybe they're an addict or whatever, and they use my money for a bottle, a drink. If I were in their situation, I'd probably want a drink too. It's not about judging what they do with it. It's just saying, I see you, I look at you, and I offer you what I can.

So here we are in this human life, with a measure of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, unbearable beauty and an ocean of tears. And this month, this week, there are personal struggles with family or work or divorce or illness or suicide—all the things that make up the troubles of our lives. But also there are the collective

troubles we face. How do we live as a country and a wise culture in a time when what's being put out, often in different ways through the media, is that which tries to frighten us? Do we let that colonize our hearts? Do we let that take us over? Or is there another way?

Is there the way of Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi, when she walked out after seventeen years of being imprisoned by the military, or Nelson after twenty-seven years on Robben Island—with such magnanimity and graciousness and compassion and forgiveness? No one can put you in prison and take over your heart. They can do what they like, but no one can take your spirit from you. And so this becomes the invitation.

Now what's also important in it is that you don't have to sacrifice yourself to do it. Compassion, generosity—all these qualities are circular. And the circle isn't complete if one person is left out. And you know who that person is. As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Yes, that person.

So you can ask, is this compassionate or generous to her, to him, to them, to whoever? And is it also compassionate to this one? Because somebody has to tend to this one, and guess who that person is. So there's a balance that's necessary.

Since I'm talking about Mother Teresa, I remember going with a colleague here, Wes Nisker, who for many years was on the radio doing extraordinary newscasting. He was kind of like The Daily Show, only twenty and thirty years before. He would tell the truth on the radio. It was extraordinary. He would say, "Here's what happened," and people would say, "Wow, he actually said it." It wasn't all obfuscated.

Anyway, he was working on a show for National Public Radio on spirituality and social responsibility. So we went to interview different people—we interviewed the Dalai Lama, we interviewed the president of India, somehow we got to see him. We interviewed yogis and various teachers. And then we went to visit Mother Teresa. I thought, how are we going to get to see Mother Teresa? I had told people I was going, and so people collected money. I had an envelope with ten thousand dollars to give her, from churches and others around here.

I thought, all right, we'll go, because I sort of knew her schedule, and I'd been there before. In the morning, she goes to chapel at five o'clock and prays with all the young novices and nuns, so we would catch her after that.

She came out, and Wes and I greeted her. "Mother, we're here for just a little while. We're doing this show. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions?" He pulled out his big reporter's microphone, and she said okay and sat down. I said, "Also, here's a gift from these churches," and she took that. Then I said, "By the way, Mother, would you mind if we filmed this?" I pulled out my camera and turned on a light.

She got pissed off. "It's five in the morning. I just did my prayers. Come on, you guys. What are you trying? I want to go and serve people, and you're trying to make your film or something."

I thought, I've come all the way to India and pissed off Mother Teresa. This is just not... But there was something in it as well. The point isn't, again, some kind of ideal of how you're supposed to be. The point—and she was the exemplar of service in many ways—is to serve in the way that truly rings true and feels true to your own heart.

Of course, we live in times of homelessness, racism, environmental destruction. It's easy to feel overwhelmed or lonely or isolated, to feel that you don't know what you can do. I don't know if you've seen it, but one of the short documentaries nominated for the Academy Award is called *4.1 Miles*. That distance—4.1 miles—is the span between one of the Greek islands along the Turkish coast and the Turkish shore itself. It's a short film, elegantly done, very few words, mostly images. It follows a Coast Guard captain in his Coast Guard fishing-type boat, going out to rescue refugees day and night on those floating boats—those who live, those who die. This little island and the islands nearby have had 600,000 refugees arrive on boats from Turkey, crossing into Europe. They're overwhelmed, but they keep doing it.

It's really extraordinary. The captain said, "I have a boat and there are children out there." And so you see them going day after day. It makes you weep to watch it, but it also wakes you up to a reality we can become inured to when watching images on television or reading about it. You can't deny it when you see it.

We live in this kind of time, and you might feel, well, I can't do enough. What can I do? But the point is really just to start to listen, to know your limitations and your capacities, but also to know that you are greater than you think. And that is the beautiful thing of these teachings: to say, "O nobly born, whoever you are, you have a capacity to serve. You have a capacity to give." As Gandhi said, "What I do, I don't do for India. I do for my own joy."

Just as you did that reflection on what it means to receive generosity from another or to offer it, you have this possibility in you. O nobly born, remember it.

Of course, there are seasons to it. There are times when you want to give to someone, but at the same time, if you look at a mother lioness or a bird or a wolf, they nourish, they provide, they sacrifice for their offspring. And then one day, it's the day to fly, baby, and they kick them out of the nest. Or it's the day you've got to go hunt, and they disappear, and you're hungry, and you're on your own, and you have to learn how to get your own food.

So it's not that it's simply, "Okay, let's take care of everybody like the mommy of the world." There's both a dignity in it and a kind of attention that's beautiful—one that says, "What can I serve? What do I understand? And how can I bring this to others?" Sometimes what you have to offer is your tears.

You know, how do I serve in the greatest difficulty? The Dalai Lama and Tutu had this conversation about joy and how they keep their spirits up in terrible times in the world. What do you do when things are really bad? They had an interesting answer. Part of it was service and generosity. But then the question was asked again: What do you do when things are really bad? And they said, "You show your humanity."

that being the greatest gift in many ways that you can give.

There's a beautiful story in Ram Dass's book called *How Can I Help?* If you don't know it, it's one of my favorite books ever. It tells of a woman who was a Maryknoll sister working in Peru as a schoolteacher at a very high altitude—13,000 feet. She became quite sick and had to return home for surgery. She could no longer work at high altitude and actually became crippled. She wondered, will I go back to Peru? Can I do anything? But she decided to go back and see, settling this time in the lower altitudes.

She said, "Everything changed, especially my attitude toward people. I could feel their poverty and pain in a new way, as if I was seeing it for the first time." And the affirmation she received was: "You're the same person you were before. Even if you can't teach or do anything, we want you to stay."

Her ministry changed. It became the ministry of walking together. She found others with physical disabilities—because she couldn't walk so well, having been crippled by her illness—and they were just trying to be together, being with them in love.

Of course, she said, many of the Peruvians they encountered with handicaps were deeply ashamed. Some hid, or they would hide their children. She thinks of Juan, a polio victim at three who had been hidden by his family behind their little house until they discovered him at age eight—five years hidden away. His brother Julio took them home one day, and there was Juan, twisted legs under him, scooting around the dirt

patio on a circular piece of rubber. His mother was suspicious—a handicapped child meant she was being punished for something, in her belief system. Think of the child. Think of the mother.

They returned on several occasions to visit him. One time they found him alone. His family, with the rest of the town, had gone on a religious procession. Of course, he had never seen one. So they borrowed a bicycle, put Juan on it, and joined in the procession. It was his first time outside the house, the first time he had looked at people from a level higher than the ground, his first procession. His parents were initially annoyed, but their attitude changed.

When the time seemed right, they asked at the next town meeting if they could raise money to send Juan to Lima for physical rehabilitation. The townspeople liked the idea, and he went off. After a long, hard struggle—a year of pain—one day he returned to the village. He was using braces and a cane. It was really hard for him, but as he began to walk down the street toward his home, people came out from their houses. They appeared from all over, cheering and clapping, following him all the way home. It was so wonderful. It was Juan's second procession.

Sometimes what you have to offer—and anybody in twelve-step work knows this—is your truth, your own suffering that you've been through, your own humanity. That too can be a tremendous act of generosity.

If you think you are too small to make a difference, if the problems in the world seem overwhelming and you don't know what you can add—well, if you think you're too small to make a difference, you've never been in bed with a mosquito.

It's the small acts. One of the things that touched me at the airport was a three-year-old girl with a sign on her, this beautiful little girl. It said, "My mom was a refugee." And then you could see her mom with her own sign. But it was just this little girl who wouldn't have been here, who wouldn't have been safe, but there she was. "My mom was a refugee." Refugees are okay. This country is made of refugees—except for the native peoples who are, unfortunately, refugees from what the invaders have done to them here, the genocide.

But in some way, we're all refugees. And then the question becomes: Can we become not only refugees, but can we find refuge?

And the refuge is really the refuge in care for one another. The refuge is in our generosity. The refuge is in the nobility of your heart and your care for one another. And it's an individual act, but it's also a call to the society at large. Who will we be? Who are we really? We have always taken in refugees. This is who we are.

I've been going back and forth to the East Coast because my twin brother has been quite sick with blood cancer—myelofibrosis and leukemia. The last year and a half has been a long series of treatments and chemo and different things, and it's been getting more and more difficult. I'm not sure how much longer he'll be alive.

As I said last time I was here, part of what's so moving to me is the time spent in the hospital or at the Dana Farber Cancer Center. I'm there with the kids with bald heads, the families holding somebody who's coming in with a walker, the people with masks because their immune systems are gone. And I see all the people who are tending them, the family members who bring them. There's so much tenderness—the nurses and doctors and staff. It's an amazing thing to watch how much we actually take care of one another. It's a beautiful thing.

My youngest brother Kenneth, who's eight years younger—he's now sixty-three—has been donating platelets. He was the one who donated a stem cell transplant, which worked for a little while and then stopped working. Other blood donations haven't worked for my twin brother, except from this one matching brother. I tried, but it wasn't a match. So for the last number of months, every five days Kenneth gives blood to my brother. He lives here, flies east, hangs out for a couple of days, then comes back. He just does it. He doesn't think about it particularly. He said, "It's my brother. Of course I'll do it."

It's like the story of Joan Schmidt, I believe her name was, who was a first grade teacher in Wisconsin. She had a little girl in her class who was on dialysis because her kidneys had failed, and it looked like she wasn't going to make it. And her teacher said, "Oh, I'll give her a kidney." This is different than giving her homework, right? And she did. She donated her kidney to this little girl who's now—it's five years later since that story—in middle school and thriving.

I just see how much care there is in the world. For every act of brutality, for all the fear that there is, for all the terrible things that happen, there's a nobility to humanity that is your birthright.

And to meditate is not so much to have some meditation experience, although they come and they're quite wonderful, along with insights. It's really to quiet ourselves, to listen to the heart, to still ourselves a little bit in the midst of all the noise of life and politics and demands and possibilities. And to reflect: what really matters? At the end of the day, or the end of the year, or the end of the month—what do I wish that I'd done, intended? How can I live? How can I offer myself to this world?

It's not just the rabbit throwing himself into the fire in that remarkable Buddhist tale. We humans really care for one another. That's why we're here. Your ancestors were all survivors, and they did all kinds of things to care for their children and their grandchildren and made it possible for you to be here.

So it's not helping others in the sense of "I'll help you." It's us. It's our family. It's our brothers, our sisters. And in this way, you step beyond the small sense of yourself to feel something beautiful, which is your brotherhood and your sisterhood.

My teacher Nisargadatta in India said there is really no separateness to self. There is no separate self. And in this open space, in this vast space, there's only one movement—the movement of love. What else really matters to us?

Well, I think if you play music and you can bring your band down to the airport, that would be a fine thing too. Somehow I think that whatever redemption we bring alive to the problems of the culture is best done with a beautiful and joyful heart. Your anger, your fear, your depression—all the things that we also have as humanity—you need to hold with compassion. That's not the game. The game is actually to be like the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi or Nelson Mandela, or whoever you want to name—to carry your beautiful spirit into whatever needs tending and plant your seeds and play your music and offer yourself.

So let's sit for a moment. When you come to the temple, the sanctuary, to sit together, may you carry the spirit of nobility, generosity, the treasure, the treasury within you. May you carry your own beautiful heart back out into the world.

Thank you again for coming, for your good behavior as you listened.

Drive politely out there. There are lots of cars and it's dark. We're still in the winter season. We might have more rain coming. Isn't that a beautiful thing?

And just as the rain comes down, may you offer your rain of love and care to the world.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 7

The Joy of Virtue (Drop-in at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · 1h09

> *In this rich dharma talk, Jack Kornfield offers a profound exploration of virtue (sīla) as one of the pāramīs—the perfections of awakening. Moving beyond conventional notions of morality as external rules, he presents integrity as the natural expression of our Buddha nature, existing outside of time as something to be discovered rather than developed over countless mahākalpas.*
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> *Kornfield outlines three levels of ethical practice: first, limiting harm through the five precepts (not killing, not stealing, not lying, not misusing sexuality, not abusing intoxicants); second, actively cultivating compassion and reverence for all life; and third, discovering virtue as our birthright and true nature. Drawing from the Jātaka tales, he shares the story of the king, the dove, and the hawk to illustrate the profound depths of selfless integrity, connecting these ancient teachings to Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance.*
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> *The talk weaves together Buddhist teachings with poetry from Ellen Bass, wisdom from Zhuangzi, and stories from the Desert Fathers, creating a tapestry that reveals how virtue brings genuine happiness, inner peace, and freedom. Kornfield emphasizes that these are not grim duties but the foundation for a beautiful life—one where we become like the lotus unstained by mud, finding our own way like the rhinoceros. Particularly relevant for times of political upheaval and social division, this teaching invites practitioners to quiet the mind, listen to the heart's integrity, and discover what each person is called to contribute to the world.*

I want to continue with a series of teachings that I started last month in a Monday class. I did a couple of talks since the election time on spirituality and politics. As Gandhi said, those who think that spirituality and politics don't go together do not understand what spirituality really means. So that seemed very important to talk about. However you voted or whatever your political point of view, it's a very fraught time in many ways—a time of much dissension and upheaval and change. Something really worthy of paying attention to.

Tonight, in continuing this series, I want to talk about Buddha nature, or your own true nature, and in particular, the joy or the happiness of integrity, which is really basic Buddhist teaching. These are called the qualities of awakening. One image that's used—because they're sometimes translated as the perfections—is that there's a mountain, Mount Vepula, as high as Mount Everest or a little higher. Every hundred years, a bird

comes along with a silk scarf in its beak and drags it across the top of this mountain, wearing it away slightly. When that mountain is worn down by the silk scarf, that is one Mahakalpa. And to become fully awakened in this particular mythology—a glorious, awakened Buddha—takes 100,000 mahakalpas, and then four immensities thrown in just to make it a little bit more interesting.

You hear that and you think, all right, I've got to practice patience for 100,000 mahakalpas, and I have to practice kindness for 100,000 mahakalpas, and I have to practice wisdom. It seems a little bit daunting. It's hard enough to do it for a New Year's resolution for a few weeks. I'm going to meditate, right? And then the silk scarf goes by. Okay, wait another hundred thousand mahakalpas.

When you hear this kind of story, a misunderstanding is to place it in time—that if you train and practice and change yourself and do all these things, eventually through zillions of hours and lifetimes, you'll become somebody different. I know you've tried that already in your own way, and it didn't work very well. You're still yourself, sad to say, but also happy to say.

Because the qualities this represents don't exist in time. They're actually timeless, universal, eternal. And so this becomes the metaphor for discovering something that's outside of time. The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity.

A couple of years ago, I went to the top of Mount Tamalpais because it was the day of a transit of Venus across the face of the sun. Somebody up there had a great big telescope with all the filters, so I could look in. First there was the big disk of the orange sun, and it was alive—when you see those videos, all those changing textures. In real time, it was very vital and alive and moving and swirling with fire and light and all its nuclear energy. And then there was this little marble, maybe one-fortieth of the sun's diameter, that slowly over the course of an hour or an hour and a half moved its way across the face of the sun. That marble being about the size of our planet as well.

Somehow in looking at it, I could feel that we're on the same ride going around the sun, and then Venus is, and Mars. We're part of some huge, vast turning of the worlds and the seasons and the galaxies. And that is true. And then we have all our problems. But as the Ojibwe say, sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

The teachings for tonight, which are really rock bottom, basic, central to Dharma or to those who would live a spiritual life—I have talked about politics and spirituality, but this is really, really basic—are a way of anchoring ourselves in what we know to be

most important amidst the politics and the fear mongering or racism or war or all those things that we see in the culture around us. These are the universal laws of human happiness in the midst of all these different cycles.

Now in modern times, there's a kind of sensibility about cultural relativity and what's right and what's wrong. You need to take in the perspectives of different peoples and different cultures, and those things need to be respected. But this is something deeper than that.

In Psych 101, there's an experiment done in the perception section where you get the unwitting student to come up to the front of the class. You have three buckets: a bucket in the middle with neutral temperature water, a bucket on one side with very hot water, and a bucket on the other side with water and ice in it. You have the student plunge their hands into the very hot water and the very cold water and hold them there for pretty much as long as they can, like thirty seconds. It gets really intense. Then they pull their hands out and put them in the middle bucket. When their hands are in the middle bucket and you watch the student, their face and eyes kind of go a little wobbly. Because their hands are touching and this hand says, this is really cold—it was in the hot water—and this hand says, it's really hot. Our perceptions and the stories we tell about them are relative in a certain way.

But underneath this truth of perceptions, there are some fundamental principles of human life and of conscious life. And virtue is one of them.

We tend to take it relatively: "Oh, it's okay to cheat a bit on our taxes," or to drive a bit over the speed limit. I was a cab driver in Boston. I have a whole lot of unfortunate driving habits that I learned there. We only took red lights as a suggestion. So we all have our things—or insider trading: "Everybody's doing it." You get a little hint and then you buy the stock.

There was a hospital in Illinois, a state hospital that was alongside a toll road. Because it had just one hospital and a few other streets on it, they didn't have a toll booth. Instead, there was a place to throw your money in at the exit. One of the psychologists there decided to do a little research. With the camera that was there, he observed which people who worked at the hospital paid their toll and which ones drove through without paying. Then he did an interesting thing: he tried to correlate it with the success of their therapies and the success of their patients in getting well. It was a psychiatric hospital. I don't know quite how he measured that success—maybe it was how soon people were released—but he had some good measurement. And he discovered that the people who paid their tolls, their patients got better quicker.

So there's something almost basic beneath all the different stories that we hear about virtue or integrity or ethics or morality. It is the adornment of humanity. And Aristotle says the only stable nation is one built on virtue. The only stable society is one built on virtue.

It's so innate in us. Again, modern psychology—not only do we know this, but there are studies like those at Yale University where they track the gaze of infants or young children who are pre-verbal, not many months old. If they show them or put them in a situation where something is unfair—one baby gets a lot and the other baby doesn't—they don't like it. That's not right. They can't say anything yet, but you can see that it upsets them. Even the great apes or chimps don't like it either. In Chicago, I think it was, even the rats don't like it. "This isn't fair. You haven't treated my sister properly." There's something in us that knows what it means to have a kind of fundamental care and integrity with what we do.

And of course it's not easy. The tales that make up these stories from thousands of years ago in India, from the teachings of the Buddha—they also use these animal fables. There's one story of a king who vowed that he would rule justly and not bring harm to any being and not cause any being to be killed. A noble king, great. He's sitting on his throne, and then one day, in through the window of the throne room flies a dove and lands on the arm of his throne and speaks to the king—because this is a fable—and says, "Help me, I'm being chased by a hawk."

Then the hawk flies in and lands on the other arm. The king says, "I am protecting this dove. I do not want beings in my kingdom to be killed."

And the hawk, who can also speak—these are cool animals—says, "Your Majesty, I survive by eating meat. This is what my diet is. I don't live on berries. That's some other kind of bird, not me. I'm a carnivore. I eat other birds. That's how I was built. That's what my incarnation is. And you are depriving me of the food that I need to survive. Help me."

So here we are. This is a morality tale. But what do we do in this situation?

Now, of course, because these are great old morality stories, what does the king do? He says, "I cannot let you kill the dove." And he orders his attendant to bring out a golden scale. He places the dove in one part of the scale and says, "Now bring me a sword." And he cuts out flesh from his own thigh and puts it there and says, "I will offer to the hawk my own body so that no one else is harmed."

It's a kind of wild and magnificent gesture.

And he does so, and he bleeds, and then he says, "It's not enough." And he cuts more, and finally he grows faint. When he loses consciousness, as happens in these tales, the hawk suddenly transforms into one of the great heavenly gods—those beings whose thrones are said to grow warm when something interesting is happening here on earth. The god descends to say, "I heard there was a just king here, but I wanted to see for myself whether it was true." And so the hawk becomes this radiant being who heals the king, saying essentially, "You're okay now, it's fine," and blesses the dove, and everything is happy thereafter.

Now you hear a story like this and you think, "How am I going to measure up to that?" And of course you can't. But at the same time, here is Mahatma Gandhi saying, in the face of unjust laws and those things that cause suffering: "If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner, without harming you in any way, we will never obey. Award us what punishment you like, we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold and we will do so laughing. Shower your sufferings upon us and we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body or anyone else. We would gladly die before so much as to touch the slightest of you. But so long as there is life in these bones, we will never comply with the laws that cause harm."

This is a human being taking on the kind of power that the story of the king and the dove illustrates. It's partly why Gandhi is so celebrated—Einstein, who was his friend, said that at some point in the future, people will not even believe that such a person even walked this earth.

It used to be that when a man or woman took an oath, it wasn't taken lightly. We stood by our character. And my teacher Ajahn Chah loved—as did the other masters I studied with—to talk about virtue, to talk about spiritual life. If you want to be happy, the joy comes from your integrity. Peace comes from your integrity. It's actually very hard to meditate after a day of killing and stealing. It doesn't work terribly well. You can try it.

Sanity for yourself and the world comes from integrity. And any practice in these dimensions we speak of—last week it was generosity, or love, compassion, wisdom, patience, truthfulness—they each, like a hologram, contain all the others. Through the practice of virtue, there is compassion, there is mindfulness, there is patience. All the great virtues come together, and spiritual life rests upon them. We know this somehow in our inner sense of conscience. As someone wrote, "The more moral a society, the less paperwork." There's a way in which we also know that when we live in a community of trust, it changes everything.

Without integrity, it's like getting in a rowboat and saying, "I'm going to go somewhere," while the line is still tied to the dock. There's no spiritual life worth anything—no insights, no great bliss, no special states. They're worthless if they don't grow out of a basis, a field of integrity. Otherwise they're just fancy stuff that comes and goes.

So there are three levels to this virtue, this integrity. The first is called limiting harm. Basically it means entering the human realm, because before that you may be embodied as a human being, but you're not really living as one. The texts say you're living more as a beast or a hungry ghost. This first level is to undertake to refrain from activities that harm one another.

I remember the local Marin County Sheriff used to park in our parking lot here. I think he would read a book and take a little break from patrolling the roads. It's a peaceful place. And one of my colleagues and good friends, Ruth Dennison—one of our senior teachers who has since died—one day we were here and I said, "Oh, the sheriff's out in the parking lot." She said, "Oh, great, darling"—she was originally born in Germany—"I have to go see him." So she went to the parking lot and said, "You know, we are making your job easier here from what we are teaching." He said, "You've come to the right place," and they had a wonderful conversation.

This is the first level of human awakening. And the first of these three levels says, in a fundamental way, I will limit harm. Traditionally there are certain trainings one undertakes, precepts of different kinds. The first is not to kill and not to harm living beings. And it's a beautiful thing to watch—the Dalai Lama has a special thing for insects and bugs.

He doesn't—except for mosquitoes. He said mosquitoes are the enemy. But other than them, he's interested and curious, and he doesn't want to harm a single living being.

I have this beautiful poem, written in magnificent calligraphy by Lloyd Reynolds, who was the nation's premier calligrapher. He was actually the master artist who taught Steve Jobs when he was up in Oregon, before he started Apple, what it meant to make a beautiful line. And his poem reads: "A bug crawls over the paper. Leave him be—we need all the readers we can get."

There's something quite powerful about simply saying, "I'm not going to harm beings." Now, I have my own difficulties with it. I give them notice, right? "Okay, you have some days, you ants or whatever, you roaches," and I put out something that doesn't

harm them for a while. But if they're really persistent, then we have to go another step. Yet it gives you the moment to reflect on really caring for life—the small life, the big life—just not to harm, not to kill.

And then the next one is not to steal. It was so ingrained in us in our monastic training, and so important, that if you stole something as a monk that was worth more than a nickel, basically, if you took it, from that moment on you were no longer a monk, even if you were wearing the robes. It was so deeply forbidden. And it was forbidden, of course, because they wanted people to respect the monastics. But it was also forbidden because it shined a light on what really matters. If you have a culture where people steal from one another, and then there's barbed wire, and there's gated communities, and there's people who are defending and so forth—we don't live in a culture where we trust one another. So to not steal is a really powerful practice.

The next one is to not speak falsely—not to use your words in a way that harms or undermines others. To speak with integrity.

John invited his mother over for dinner. During the meal, his mother couldn't help noticing how beautiful John's roommate was. She'd long been suspicious about a relationship between John and the roommate, and this only made her more curious. Watching the two interact over the meal, she started to wonder how much more there was than met the eye. John could see it and volunteered, "I know what you might be thinking, but I assure you, Carrie and I are just roommates."

A week later, Carrie came to John and said, "Ever since your mother came to dinner, I've been unable to find that beautiful silver soup ladle. You don't suppose she did something with it, do you?"

"I doubt it, but I'll email her for sure."

"Mother, I'm not saying you did anything with the silver soup ladle or not, but for some reason it's disappeared ever since you were here for dinner. Do you know anything about it?"

Later in the day, he received an email which read: "Dear son, I'm not saying you do sleep with Carrie, and I'm not saying you don't. But the fact remains that if she was sleeping in her own bed, she would have found the ladle by now. Love, Mom."

It's called "Don't Lie to Your Mother." It just doesn't work. And in this time of truthiness and all of those things, to speak what's true and to hear what's true, to know what's true, is really a blessing. It becomes more valuable than ever.

And then to not harm through the misuse of sexuality—you know, whatever it is, adultery or causing pain. How many people in this room have made idiots of yourselves in relation to sexuality? Don't bother raising your hands. We already know about you.

This is a very powerful force, and it can be used in beautiful ways, or it can be used—out of our greed or fear or confusion or other motivations—to cause a lot of suffering. So this simply says: don't misuse sexuality in a way that causes harm to others. It's not like you're supposed to, or this is some morality from on high. These are the principles of happiness. You want to be happy? Follow them. They are the foundation for a truly happy human life.

And then the last is not to abuse intoxicants—alcohol and drugs. Ten million drug addicts, twenty million alcoholics, fifty million people in their extended families in America. The majority of auto fatalities, the majority of home fires, the majority of child abuse. It's really powerful stuff.

So again, it says: pay attention to these energies of life and navigate them from the place of conscience, from the place of understanding, from the place of mindfulness and care—because that's the treasure that you have.

That's who you really are. And that's the only thing you can take with you in the end—your integrity and your virtue. Or as Spencer Tracy, the movie actor, said: just know your lines and don't bump into the furniture. It's that basic, that simple.

And yet, if you were to imagine even half of one of these trainings spreading across the earth—not even a whole one—just that we stop killing people, or stop telling lies even though we might still gossip, even a little bit of it would make an entirely different planet. Imagine if we didn't kill each other. Kind of crazy that we do, don't you think? Really crazy.

It's about time. We've more or less come to the conclusion that slavery is bad, even though there still is slavery in some places in the world. I think it's about time that we came to the conclusion that war is bad, and that there's an alternative. I mean, when you have kids in kindergarten and they're whacking each other with the blocks, you say, "Use your words," right? Gosh, you guys—how about the grown-ups? Some of these world leaders, could you use your words?

Yes. The earth is too small a star, and we too brief visitors upon it, for anything to matter more than the truth, more than what we care about—our own virtue.

So the next level of sīla—and you can hear how it becomes more beautiful as it goes along—is not only refraining from harm, but either expressing or cultivating compassion. Not just to refrain, but to see somehow that we're all in the same boat. Edmund Burke says, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good people do nothing."

This is a really important reflection. It's not just that you refrain from harm, but that it's in your good hands, in your heart, to care for this world. And again, not because it's some great dictum of morality about who's good and who's bad. This is what makes a human life beautiful and noble. It is living your own Buddha nature. It's an empowerment.

And because we're all connected, we're all cells in the same living body. As Lewis Thomas says, the driving force in nature on this biosphere, this planet Earth, is cooperation. He's one of our great biologists. It's cooperation. The most inventive and novel of all schemes in nature, the most significant in determining the great landscape of evolution, is symbiosis—which is simply cooperative behavior carried to an extreme. We're woven into life. This is who we are.

So then, how we drive, how we use water, how we respond to homelessness or injustice or racism, what we eat, how we care for our brothers and sisters of every color and every orientation and every ability—this actually becomes the gift you are given to produce a beautiful life.

And not killing then becomes a reverence for life, a care for the earth. So that when Chief Seattle says, "What is mankind without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, humankind would surely die from a great loneliness of spirit. For what happens to the beasts happens to man."

And we know it, but we sort of put it aside and go about our day. And yet—the Mele Binturong and the Malabar civet and the Hawaiian monk seal and all species of rhino and twelve species of antelope and fifteen species of turtle and twenty-two species of shrews and all the great apes—the orangutans and the gorillas and the chimps—and six species of whales and all species of manatee and the golden lemur and the Indus and the Yangtze dolphin and the woolly spider monkey. These are your brothers and sisters. And they're saying, "Pay attention to me. Don't just refrain from harm, but remember that we too are part of your web of life, woven into the same single garment of destiny."

So it's a reverence for life that grows.

And then not stealing turns into concern and care, stewardship for what you have. I mean, we live in a prosperous society. And what do we do with it? It's not just not stealing—it's actually not being piggy. Sorry, Miss Piggy, I didn't mean to say anything really anti-pig to you, but you know exactly what I mean.

There are—I don't know—how many tens of millions of hungry children on this earth? Many tens of millions. My beloved Trudy just came back a couple months ago from working in the Darfur refugee camps on the border of Chad. And she said many of the kids, most of the adults there, have the orange hair of kwashiorkor because they don't get enough nourishment. Our grain elevators are full of food. We're telling farmers to plow things under. The world doesn't need more food.

The world doesn't need more oil. It needs less greed. Less prejudice. It needs more love.

So the precept is not just about refraining from stealing—it's about reverence for what we've been given. I read a story about an older Japanese immigrant woman whose job was to clean and tend the bathrooms in a public facility in New York. Some local kids came in one day and sprayed graffiti all over those bathrooms, messed things up the way kids sometimes do. And she was upset, and she left a note on the door that said simply, "Please do not desecrate my place of work."

It was so simple. It was an unthinking act on the part of those kids. But for her, it was her place of work. And every place on this earth is the place of somebody's work, or some creature's work. So we start to take care with things in this world.

This is from William Faulkner. He writes: "Some things you must always be unable to bear. Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. No matter how old you are or how young you are. Not for fame, not for cash. Your picture in the paper nor money in the bank. Just refuse to bear them."

And you hear it, and you know that there's something true in this. There are things that our mindfulness and compassion—when we sit here and quiet the mind and tend the heart—there are things we touch inside that know: this is really what matters to me.

And then, of course, there's the precept of not lying, of caring for the truth. The Buddha says speak in due season, speak to the benefit of others, speak that which is honest.

The people you have to lie to own you. The things you have to lie about own you. When your children see you owned, then they are not your children anymore. They are the children of what owns you. If money owns you, they are the children of money. If your need for pretense and illusion owns you, they are the children of pretense and illusion. If your fear of loneliness owns you, they are the children of loneliness. If your fear of truth owns you, they are the children of the fear of truth.

So it's really, especially now with public discourse about what's true and what's not becoming so alive for all of us—it's not so much a time to put your commentary out there, although you might, and you need to act and respond from whatever is your place of integrity. But in terms of truth, it means getting quiet and listening to that truth that's inside yourself. That which you know to be so, no matter if everybody else told you it's not true. You know what matters. There's something so fundamental in it.

Sexuality. Eros. The first teaching is not to harm. But Eros has tremendous power. If we look at the advertising of our country and the images—not to speak of our own teenage years—there's this enormous power. Part of the power of Eros is love, and part of it is connecting sexually. Somehow we see that we have these mysterious ways of being attracted to one another. Sometimes it's to make children, or accidentally make children. Sometimes it's just to love another being in the most extraordinary and intimate way.

We don't talk about it so much in meditation, but it's absolutely critical. And again, if I were to ask not only how many of you have made idiots of yourselves, but how many have suffered in the area of sexuality? We used to have these men's retreats that I led here for many years, and one of the evenings we'd do a council where men would tell their sexual histories in the center of the room. While there was some beauty and joy in it, there was inevitably confusion, pain, suffering, not knowing how to deal with it.

But at the same time, it's magic. When we love somebody and when we can touch someone in an intimate way, there's something so—it's as if we touch things we touch when we walk in the mountains, or listen to a magnificent piece of music, or are there at the birth of a child, or witness the mysterious passing of a human being. And making love is one of those things.

Okay, a poem for you from one of my favorite poets, Ellen Bass in Santa Cruz, one of our great poets.

And she likes to write a lot about sexuality. It's called "Jack Gottlieb's In Love."

I'm talking to Jack Gottlieb's son, my childhood friend from Pleasantville. He was a skinny, dark-haired guy with a neck thin as the stalk of a dahlia. We lived in railroad apartments over our parents' stores. Now he's balding and quadriplegic from the brush of an eight-axle truck.

"My father's got a girlfriend," he tells me. "He's having more sex than you and me in both of our neighborhoods combined."

I picture Jack Gottlieb, 86, stroking the loosened skin of his beloved, puckered as fruit left too long on the limb. Skin softened the way I once read a pregnant woman stranded alone in a hut in Alaska softened a hide for her baby's birth, chewing it hours and hours each day.

Life has been gnawing Jack Gottlieb like that. First his son, stricken, stripped down to sheer being in the chair. Then his grown daughter, died from cancer, and his old wife following like earth into that grave.

Comes love. All the cells in Jack's old organs stir. The heart, which had been ready to kick back and call it a day, signs on for another stint. The blood careens through the crusted arteries like a teenage skateboarder. He kisses each separate knob of her spine, the shallow basin of her belly, crowning it like a queen. The sad knave that's hung between his legs, extraneous and out of date, ill-fitting as his old vest, is now steam-pressed and ready for the ball.

Comes love. Jack Gottlieb is a child sledding down a hill and climbing up again, face flushed, breath hot, visible in the twilight. He can't believe her goodness. Life, that desperate addict, has mugged and robbed him on the street. And then she appears, taking his head in her palms. He handles her reverently as though she were the Rosetta Stone, revealing what lies beyond hope. He scoops her into his hands and she pours through his fingers again and again.

Ellen writes about all kinds of sexuality—not just heterosexuality, but every kind. There's something about the honesty of it. I especially like this poem because I just got married at almost 72. So thank you, Jack, for showing the way.

But there's a way in which that energy of Eros, whether it's literally enacted as sexual energy or simply the spark between us, can bring a kind of beauty into the world. And we can cultivate it and care for it.

I had these friends years ago, back in the seventies, who decided to travel around the world and visit all the most peaceful cultures they could. They visited the !Kung Bushmen in Africa, the Inuit, cultures where there wasn't a lot of conflict or violence or war.

They said that one of the things common to all these cultures was that there wasn't much teaching about the afterlife. It was all here. They had a reverence for the body. And they knew how to dance—which is part of that Eros. If you want your revolution, you want a little dance in it.

And then the fifth precept—not to abuse intoxicants—becomes not just about abstaining, but rather about doing that which wakes us up. Taking time in silence as we did tonight, listening to our own breath and heart and body. Walking in the mountains. Listening to music. Coming together in community.

Here again is Zhuangzi, the great Chinese sage. Speaking of intoxicants, he says: "A drunken man who falls out of a cart, though he may suffer, does not die. His bones are the same as other people's, but he meets his accident in a different way. His spirit is in a condition of security. He's not conscious of riding in the cart, neither is he conscious of falling out of it. Ideas of life, death, fear, and the like cannot penetrate his breast, and so he does not suffer from contact with objective existence. If such security is to be got from wine, how much more is to be found resting in the Tao?"

There's some kind of trust that grows—the trust that we can live a life that's intoxicated in the right way. Intoxicated by that crescent little moon you saw as you drove up here. By the cold snap of spring following the rain and rain and rain. Everything insanely green, like we're living in Ireland. Thank you and hallelujah.

There's something about letting yourself be intoxicated by the life around you and by each person you meet and by the things that present themselves. At this level, the level of reverence knows that life is complicated, but that underneath there's an intention of the heart to care for it all. Like a parent. And it doesn't mean you want to judge other people so much. That's not a very helpful thing in virtue.

This from Elizabeth Taylor: "The problem with people who have no vices is that generally you can be sure they're going to have some pretty annoying virtues."

So the point isn't somehow holier than thou. It's not that at all. It's actually love. You almost can't separate virtue from love, or virtue from compassion, or virtue from care.

O Nobly Born, begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Discover that you have within you—whether you call it conscience, virtue, or integrity—as your very essence. And when you know this, then the fears of insecurity, the pulls of self-interest, the fear of dying—all those things that are natural to us as human beings, that we all carry—they are somehow placed before you, and the integrity you have is even bigger.

There's a description of a man named Mr. Liu, who was locked up in a communist Chinese prison because he was speaking against the government, against land being stolen and various injustices in his community. So he spoke out against the government. He was imprisoned for eleven years and forced to sit on a little wooden stool most of the time. To get out of prison, all he had to do was sign a paper saying that what he had said was wrong and untrue. For eleven years he wouldn't sign the paper.

When he finally got out and somebody asked why he couldn't sign it, he said, "I could see the faces of all the people that I live with, the people whose lands were stolen, the people that I cared about. And then I remembered what I cared about." And he said, "So I sat." That sounds like Horton the Elephant—I sat and I sat and I sat and I sat, and I simply couldn't do it.

There's something so magnificent about integrity when we awaken to it in ourselves. We become the king or queen of the world, the benevolent one, whose every act is to bestow virtue and justice. That's the kind of leadership one would like to discover and have and embody.

Thomas Merton writes, "Saints are holy not because of their own sanctity, but because they have the gift of sainthood that allows them to admire everyone else." That's really what a saint is. Not that they're so holy, but that they can see the secret beauty of every single being they meet.

And so this is called *Adi Sila*. It is the discovery of virtue as your birthright, your true integrity. I have a story to read to you.

Abbot Anastasius had a book written on very fine parchment which was worth eighteen gold pence, and had in it both the Old and New Testament. Once a certain young brother came to visit him, and seeing how valuable the book was, made off with it. That day when Abbot Anastasius went to read, he found that the book was gone. He realized the young brother had taken it, but he didn't send after him to inquire about it, for fear that the brother might then add perjury to the theft.

The young brother went down to the nearby city of Alexandria to sell the book, and the price he asked was sixteen gold pence. The buyer said, "Give me the book that I might find out if it's worth this much." With that, the buyer took the book back to the holy Abbot Anastasius and said, "Father, take a look at this book, please, and tell me whether you think I ought to buy it, and whether sixteen gold pence is a good price. Is it worth that much?"

The abbot held it up and said, "Yes, it is a fine book, worth at least that much."

So the buyer went back to the brother and said, "Here's your money. I showed the book to Abbot Anastasius and he said it's a fine book, worth at least sixteen gold pence."

The brother asked, "Was that all he said? Didn't he make any other remarks?"

"No," said the buyer, "he didn't say another word."

"Well," said the brother, "I've changed my mind. I don't want to sell the book after all."

And he hastened back to the abbot and begged him with tears to take back his book. But the abbot would not accept it, saying, "Go in peace, brother. I make you a gift of it."

But the brother said, "If you do not take it back, I shall never have any peace."

After that, the brother dwelled with Abbot Anastasius for the rest of his life, among the desert fathers and their disciples. You hear it and it's almost impossible to imagine —but not completely impossible.

And part of the delight of hearing that story is because it resonates with what we already know, with the kind of conscience and purity and integrity that was born into us. It's inexhaustible. It's timeless. It brings us blessings no matter how difficult things are.

When Martin Luther King's church was bombed and children were killed, he said, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force." There's something so ennobling about this. And so for Martin Luther King, again he goes on, "I still believe that standing up for the truth is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to seek pleasure or to be happy and avoid pain. The end of life is to follow the sacred truth, come what may."

And so you hear these stories not just as beautiful parables, but because they are in you. They are who you are. When you sit and quiet your mind and tend yourself, you will know what to do. You will know how to respond. You will know what's called for you.

I got a phone call from one of my friends in Thailand who is a troublemaker—an official troublemaker. He was part of the extended royal family, and then he became kind of the Gandhi figure of Thailand, Ajahn Sulak. But he also became a thorn in the side of the government. It's always a good place for a thorn to be. At one point he was going to be jailed for speaking something against the king, which is a great stricture in Thailand —if someone does, you get locked up.

But he's the person who worked with the abbots of monasteries to take their robes and go ordain the largest trees in the remaining forest, making them the abbots of the forest so no one would cut down that part of the forest. He was a person who helped bring peace, the monastics bringing their whole monastic community at times to stand between warring factions of the government or the demonstrating students or the Buddhists and the Muslims—just to stand there and be a symbol of peace. He did all these wonderful things.

And he said, "You know, they might throw me in jail for a long time. I need some friends." And I said, "I'll be there if I can, if there's anything I can do." Because there's something so beautiful about standing up for what matters to you.

The words of the Buddha: Be like the lion, not frightened by noise. Be like the wind, not caught in the web. Be like the lotus, not stained by the mud. Find your own way like the rhinoceros. You will know which way to go. The rhinoceros is this great creature, but also it doesn't follow the crowd. It follows what it knows more deeply inside.

And so you begin to listen. Not in some ideal way, and not to judge yourself—we've done that too long. But to listen and to nourish and embody the things that you care about. And then it becomes your treasure. "The scent of sandalwood, jasmine, and rose bay travels only as far as the wind," says the Buddha. "But the fragrance of virtue rises even to the gods."

So you begin to discover what's possible in this way.

A little reflection for you. Since what's truly yours is your virtue, let your eyes close for a moment. First, just sense whatever you've heard tonight that struck you as valuable or important. The rest of it you can let go. But that which really reminded you of something that you already know—if you were to carry this out into the world more fully, if you were to embody a reverence for life, for justice, care, integrity of word and deed, what might you do beyond what you are already engaged in? What are you called to do? What does your own heart's integrity ask of you at this time? You can know.

When we end, you might even want to write down what your reflection was so you can really remember it. And again, it's not about being idealistic. Sometimes all we can do is refrain from harming. And hallelujah, may that be so for us individually.

For us as a nation, we are the largest arms exporter on the face of the earth. We sell tens of billions of dollars of killing machines all around the world. And yet we worry that we're not so safe. Oh, let's build more of those. Let's pay attention to this.

Sometimes all we can do is not harm, or refrain from harm. But other times, something is touched in you, in us, that brings out the nobility and the beauty of the king or queen in you—your virtue, your integrity. And it moves through you as if you are touched by the gods.

Mark Twain says it's curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare. I don't think he's quite right. I actually think that there's a lot of courage in humanity and millions of acts of it every day. But what's asked of us is to listen—what can we contribute? What is our place and what is our part?

Thomas Jefferson, in the same sort of way, says one person with courage is a majority. One person who really stands up for something—there's a tremendous power in your integrity. Yes, as Gandhi said, they can throw me in prison. Yes, you can face consequences for it. But one person with courage is a majority, and can make extraordinary things happen.

The last thing to say is this: this is all actually about human happiness. These are ways for us in our own lives to follow the Dharma, the universal laws of things. How to quiet ourselves and find an inner freedom and balance that can embody what matters from our heart. How to live a life that really ennobles us and expresses our Buddha nature.

But the point is also not to make it a grim duty. If it feels that way, it's not virtue, really. I mean, it's okay—you're practicing, like training wheels, it's okay. But actually there's something beautiful about it. Beautiful about telling the truth. Beautiful about care for life. Beautiful about attending to those around us with this kind of loving awareness.

Molly Ivins, who was a great journalist for the New York Times and in Texas and various places, wrote sometime before she died: "So keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds. But don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous. Rejoice in all the oddities freedom can produce. And when you get through celebrating the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who follow how much fun it was."

There's something in that spirit—this is not about grim duty. It's really about carrying something beautiful, which is who you really are.

Whatever your life circumstances, whatever your politics, your perspectives—there's something deep in you that's called forth, maybe especially at this time. Remember to quiet your mind, tend the heart. Remember that you're part of something so

much bigger than the political waves that come from left and right and swing us. They come and they go and we have to respond. We need to. But have a big perspective. It's not the end of the story; we're in the middle of it. And you get to plant seeds in it.

Someone said they thought they would bury us, not knowing that we were seeds. You carry something beautiful in yourself, and what's asked is to quiet yourself and remember and discover it, and then bring it forth into the world.

Spirit Rock is now one of your homes, so you can come walk the land, come to a class.

And Gary, I particularly thank you for that beautiful, beautiful meditative music.

Good night.

CHAPTER 8

Surprising Delights of Renunciation (Drop-in at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · 1h06

> *In this teaching on the third of the ten pāramīs (perfections), Jack Kornfield reframes nekkhama (renunciation) not as deprivation but as a profound source of joy and freedom. Drawing from his years as a forest monk in Thailand and his work with dying patients, he illuminates how our attachments—to possessions, to controlling others, to fixed views, and to fear—create the very suffering we seek to escape.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together Buddhist teachings with contemporary research, including studies on telomeres showing how inequality affects cellular health across all social strata, and the famous marshmallow experiment illustrating our struggle with delayed gratification. He shares moving stories: meditators giving away money at a bank during Occupy, two women in Berlin—one whose father survived the concentration camps and one whose father was a Nazi guard—embracing in mutual forgiveness, and Gandhi's fearless stance against the British Empire.*
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> *The Buddha taught that knowing satisfaction makes one rich regardless of circumstances, while those who don't know satisfaction remain poor even in abundance. This talk offers practical wisdom for householders navigating these divided times: how to hold possessions without being possessed by them, to love without grasping, to maintain values without clinging to views, and to act with fearless compassion. As Ajahn Chah taught, 'If you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll be a lot happier. If you really let go, everything will be easy for you.'*

Let yourself find a way to sit comfortably and listen to these teachings. Not so much because you're supposed to remember them or there's a quiz or something, but to listen to see what they remind you of that you know to be true. And if it seems wrong or doesn't seem true, then just let it go. But if it touches something of your own wisdom and reminds or supports or illuminates that, then that's a benefit or a blessing.

This evening, I want to continue a set of teachings that I'll be doing pretty much throughout the year on Buddha nature, and in particular what are called the ten perfections of the human heart. Basically, they're one of the many Buddhist recipes for human happiness. What's true about them is that they speak in a kind of timeless way to our experience.

I have a poem here from Gabriela Mistral, the great Chilean poet. She writes:

A woman is singing in the valley. The shadows falling blot her out, but her song spreads over the fields. Her heart is broken, like the jar she dropped this afternoon among the pebbles in the brook. Does she sing for a husband who looks at her silently in the dusk? Or for a child whom her song caresses? Or does she sing for her own heart more helpless than a babe at nightfall? Night grows maternal before this song that goes to meet it. The stars with a sweetness that is human are beginning to come out. And the sky full of stars understands the sorrows of this world. Her song is pure as water filled with light, cleanses the plain and rinses the mean air of the day in which men hate. And from the throat of this woman who keeps on singing, day rises nobly, evaporating toward the stars.

I read this to bring in a sense of a rhythm that's so much bigger than our ordinary rhythm of life—the rhythm of the movement of the spheres and the turning of the seasons and the rise and fall of dynasties and the changes that we participate in that are much beyond our human doing.

I wanted to offer these teachings on the paramitas this year particularly because we're living in divided times and confusing times, politically and socially and in other ways. It seemed important to come back to some ground of basic dharma or teachings of truth that are timeless, that we can rest in and use to understand how to act and live in the world in times of volatility and so much change.

So far we've talked about generosity, the first of them, which is really generosity of spirit. And then we talked about virtue, integrity—that if we don't have some fundamental integrity, we move through the world like a boat without a rudder, thrown around by all the temptations and difficulties. All these are not "you're supposed to be virtuous" or "you should be generous." They're actually invitations to happiness. This is a way for you to have a profound well-being of heart and spirit and mind.

The third of these qualities—and you might think, what is he going to talk about?—is *nekkhamma*, which means renunciation. Happiness and renunciation: how do those fit together? It's particularly hard to understand in a society that teaches that accumulation is happiness, which is one of the big messages we're surrounded by.

And yet we know that when you go camping and you're there out in the Sierras in your little tent, and you have almost nothing but the cook stove and the freeze-dried food or whatever you brought up with you, some of the happiest times of your life are not encumbered by all the things of the world. You're present, in a kind of immediacy with the rest of this mystery.

A couple of years ago during the Occupy movement, which was really partly fueled by a vision or an understanding that we need to adjust the way our society is working because the inequality between very wealthy and very poor has increased and brought suffering to a lot of people—folks from the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland decided they were going to do a demonstration. They picked one of the major banks that had been a focus of Occupy on Wall Street, trying to make a statement that it's not so much about money and how much money a corporation can make, but how we use our money.

The meditation center's action was to go in front of one of the major banks in Oakland, stand there very peacefully, do some meditation, and give out a dollar to everyone who walked by. Instead of taking your money, we're going to give you money. It shocked people. Some people took it, some people didn't, some were quizzical. The bank locked the doors—there's protesters out there. It sort of frightened them. But they watched, and these people were very peaceful, giving away money. Finally, they ran out of dollars and needed change. They knocked on the bank and held up a twenty-dollar bill, and the staff opened the door: sure, we'll give you ones. They became like friends with the people inside the bank.

There's accumulation, and it has its place, but in our society we've lost the sense of what really brings happiness.

How many of you would like to simplify your life? Look around—yes. There are a few who don't raise their hands, but that's because they're shy, actually.

When I lived as a monk, and with these monks and nuns for the years that I did, it was very much a life of renunciation. You shave your head, you leave your home, you live with an alms bowl and very, very few things. The idea is to shed those encumbrances in the monastic order and pay attention to your own heart and how you live. And that's really what matters the most.

There was a lot of teaching about renunciation for the monastics that we did. You get the food that's put in your alms bowl that day. And some days you don't get food. Okay, well, I trust that I'll get food tomorrow. And you do usually, so it's okay. But you learn to live by a very different measure than what you have.

And then you listen—okay, this is in the Buddhist teachings—is this necessary for us, for liberation? Here we are, householders. But we also don't just want to go to the temple and make some offering, as is common in the temples in Asia. People in the West are also very much interested in their inner liberation in the midst of their business and their household life. We too need renunciation.

There is a text from the Buddha's teaching: "Herein, what are the kinds of joy based on renunciation? When, by knowing impermanence, change, that all things change, fading away, the cessation of all that arises, one sees the world as it actually is—impermanent, fleeting, like a star at dawn, like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a dream. And proper wisdom forms, that all things are impermanent, ungraspable, not to find satisfaction that is lasting in them. And thus understanding, great joy arises. Such joy is the joy based on deep understanding and renunciation."

Okay, that sounds good in a certain way, but how does it apply to us? Here we live in a desire-based culture mostly. Mae West said, "I can resist anything but temptation." Right?

There was a famous scientific experiment done by Walter Mischel a couple of decades ago or so. The gist of it is that you take a young child and a marshmallow. You've heard of this, I'm sure. You put the marshmallow on the plate, you take the young child there, and you say, "You can have it now, or if you just wait a bit, I'll be back and I'll give you two marshmallows." It's basically determining whether that child can delay gratification. And from the social science point of view, what it showed was that the children who had developed somewhat of that capacity in fact succeeded much better in school, in relationships, or work, because they somehow were able to regulate themselves better.

I really see this as the picture of what it's like when you're beginning to meditate and how hard it can be with all the storms and the different things that come to people.

And she was crying when she left, not because it was hard, but because she had never been so happy. There was something about the simplicity that allowed her to see what really mattered.

The renunciation of physical things, the simplification of our lives, offers a kind of freedom. But there's also the renunciation of mental states, which is perhaps more subtle and more important. We can renounce our judgments, our opinions, our need to be right. We can renounce our complaints and grievances. We can renounce the endless commentary that the mind provides about everything.

A Tibetan teacher once said, "The problem with us is that we have too many opinions." And it's true. We carry around these heavy burdens of views and positions and stances on everything. What would it be like to set some of that down? To not need to have an opinion about everything? To not need to be right?

There's also the renunciation of identity, of who we think we are. We construct these elaborate stories about ourselves, about our history, about our wounds, about our accomplishments. And we carry them around like precious possessions. But they too can become a prison.

The Buddha spoke of the conceit of "I am" as one of the last fetters to be released. Not that we don't function as individuals, but that we hold our sense of self more lightly. We recognize it as a construction, a useful convention, but not the whole truth of who we are.

And finally, there's the renunciation of time itself, in a sense. The letting go of the past with its regrets and resentments, the letting go of the future with its hopes and fears, and the resting simply in this present moment. This is the deepest renunciation, and also the most liberating.

And she said that it was the happiest time in her life. The teachings were beautiful, the spirit of the people there was beautiful, but there was also something about just living—like camping, I said—living with that level and that kind of simplicity.

So in the end, our happiness is not what we have or don't have. It's not saying you should get rid of things, but it's our ability to be present for life as it is, rather than wanting and grasping and so forth.

The great Zen poet Ryokan writes:

My life may appear melancholy, but traveling through this world, I've entrusted myself to heaven. In my sack, three quarts of rice. By the hearth, a bundle of firewood. If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Wealth and honor, praise and blame arise and pass like the weather. As the evening descends, I return to my hermitage and stretch out both feet in answer.

My answer is: here we are. This beautiful way.

Now, some years ago, my friend Duane Elgin, who's also a dharma practitioner, wrote a book called *Voluntary Simplicity*—I think in the seventies or eighties, it's hard to remember quite when it came out. And most people want to simplify. But it's also not that easy. I know from living in villages and places where it was very simple, there was something really refreshing about that simplicity. Thoreau says the soul grows by subtraction, not by addition. When you simplify in certain ways—outwardly and inwardly—you can listen in a new way.

Of course, even when you simplify, the habit of clinging is there. I noticed in my monastic life that a monk friend of mine had a very cool set of robes that came from the garments they were using in funerals. They were sort of special robes because you were like a really cool monk if you had these old funeral robes. And I'd look and say, "Gee, I wonder when I'm going to get robes like that." And he had a really nice alms bowl and mine was not all that nice. You start to see how it is. It doesn't matter where you are—that desire thing starts to work.

But you want to reflect: What is it time to let go of, or to hold lightly? And it's not about poverty. Because the Buddha, again, says in one of these wonderful texts—well, I'll read it to you:

A wealthy businessman said to the Buddha, "I see you are the awakened one, and I would like to open my mind and heart and ask your advice. My life is full of work. I employ many people who depend on me to be successful. I enjoy my work and like working hard. But having heard your followers talk of the bliss of renunciation, and seeing you as a homeless one, should I do the same? I long to do what is right."

And the Buddha replied, "The bliss of a truth-seeking life is attainable for anyone who follows the path of unselfishness. If you cling to your wealth, it's better to throw it away than let it poison your heart. But if you don't cling to it and use it wisely, then you will be a blessing to people. It's not wealth and power that enslave us, but the clinging to them."

And the truth is that you don't get to keep it anyway. You have it for a certain time. It's sort of like you're the accountant in the firm—you take care of it and you pay your taxes on it, you tend it, whatever it is. And then at some point you have to give it up. The real question is: does it possess you?

And not only does it possess us in some way, but if we look in our society—does it possess us collectively? Everyone knows the passage from Eisenhower at the end of his presidency, where he says:

Every gun that's made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who are cold and not clothed. The world in armaments is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all, in its true sense. It is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

And so here we are, in the richest nation on earth.

Emerson says the wisdom of nations is shown by what they do with their surplus capital. How do we use the wealth that was given to us? If we look in a certain way, we're also sadly a warlike nation, and I can count dozens of wars that we've been in, big and small, in my own lifetime. Pretty much not many years between them—the little ones like Grenada or Panama, or Libya, or many, many others. And then, of course, there are all the other wars elsewhere. But we also supply the majority of armaments to the world, more than any other country. And then we worry that we're not safe. There might be some connection between those two.

So we start to reflect on this, again not to make a political statement or to favor one political point of view or another, but to look at what benefits humanity from the deepest place. And I remember being in New Delhi, along the river where there's a great big park, an open expanse with some stone walls on the side inscribed with the sayings of Gandhi. It's a memorial to Gandhi, where his body was cremated. And on one of them, there's a famous phrase where it says, "Before you act, think of the poorest person you've met and consider if your next act will be of any benefit to them." It's a really powerful question to consider—what is our relationship to others?

I just came from a conference at UCLA this past weekend on consciousness and mind and human well-being. It had neuroscientists and physicists and psychologists and various teachers of different kinds. It was really quite a wonderful conference. My favorite presentation there was from a woman named Elissa Epel. She works at UC Medical Center and is a professor there, working together with Elizabeth Blackburn, who won the Nobel Prize for discovering telomeres—those caps on the ends of your chromosomes that protect you from aging. When they start to fray and diminish, the cells start to die and eventually your body dies.

But it turns out, one of the things that Elissa's research showed—and she couldn't believe it, she did it several times and then she published it and no one else believed it until they replicated it—was that if you meditate for some weeks, they can measure that the telomeres in your cells actually repair themselves more. Your life is extended, you get healthier cells, and it's measurable. So that was already a wild finding that she could hardly believe, but it's been replicated many times.

But the thing she said that was much newer and interesting was this: Your cells are listening to the world. She said we can see it as geneticists in the epigenetics of your cell—certain things get activated or turned on or turned off depending on the hormones in your body and the level of stress or well-being. We're tuned to those around us and to the environment.

The particular thing she measured was that in places or societies where there's a very big differential between the wealthiest and the poorest of that population, obviously those who are poor have more stress and their telomeres get frayed—because there's not enough food, or there's violence around them, or whatever suffering that racism and poverty bring to their lives. But it turns out that in those same areas or countries, the people who are wealthy, their telomeres also shorten. As if somehow their body and their cells, even if it's not conscious—they may feel guilty about having a lot of money or they may not—but somehow our bodies are tuned to the matrix of the humanity around us. And so their lifespan is also shorter because the lifespan of the people around them is shorter. It's a wild piece of research that points to interdependence.

So when Gandhi says, "Think of the poorest person you've met and consider if your next act will be of benefit to them," it turns out that *them* is us. We're in the family together.

One dimension of renunciation, then, is renunciation of attachment to things, renunciation from greed, so that what you have is both appropriate and used in a beautiful way. That's what makes the heart happy. Otherwise, you're not so happy.

Now, renunciation of the second kind is the renunciation of the possession of others—that is to say, people being possessed. To the extent that you try to possess or control your lovers, your spouse, your children, your parents, whoever it is—first of all, they don't like it. You may have noticed that. And it's generally not a very successful strategy.

I remember when my daughter was first learning to drive. There she was, fifteen or sixteen, and that terrifies every parent—and it should. Then this guy came who was from the driving school and said, "Get in, let's head out toward the freeway." I'd given her lessons in a parking lot. I said, "You're going to take her on the freeway?" He said, "Oh, the girls are easy, it's the boys I worry about." But we'll leave that aside for the moment. All I could do was pray. That's it. She's going to do her best, and here's a car. That's all you can do.

And in the end, that's pretty much all that you can do anyway with our kids or with the people that we care about. Mostly, in the end, what we can do is love them. Ursula Le Guin wrote, "Love doesn't just sit there like a stone. It has to be made like bread, remade all the time, made new." And that love is not a possessive love, because that's not really love, but the renunciation of the grasping of how they should be.

Now I'm about to go off to the East Coast in a day or so to be with my twin brother who's in the last weeks of his cancer—myelofibrosis and leukemia—and he's called hospice. I've been going back and forth. I'm very close to him, and my other brothers will all be there. And I had some ideas about what might be the right, good thing for him in terms of hospice and how he might die peacefully and so forth. But it turned out, of course, he had some ideas. And his family had ideas. And the family's ideas were not even necessarily his ideas.

And I could see, you know, from all my experience and thought, this might be really good—but it's not my place to determine that. People die in character. They die as they lived. They die in the circumstance of the people that they're with. And I might have some idea. But it turns out that basically the game is to go and love people as they are. And there's a deep kind of renunciation in this.

Here, let me read you a story. I told you Frank Ostaseski is going to come and teach with me next month. This is a story from his wonderful new book called *The Five Invitations*.

So this is talking about someone who has Alzheimer's or dementia. She was finally unable to live on her own, this woman, and so one of her daughters brought her into her home and tried to create a place where she could live. Not long after bringing her mother with dementia to live with her, Jillian—that was the woman—walked into the living room to find her beloved books scattered across the floor. Jillian was a writer who had these bookcases full of all the classics and things she loved, including her sacred Buddhist texts and her favorite antique books. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty old books. I'm going to give them to my dentist."

Now, Jillian was momentarily trapped by rage. She scolded her mother's assistant or attendant who was there all day taking care of her. "How could you let her do this? How could you let this happen?" And the attendant, who was not caught in the whole drama, replied, "Ma'am, today I pack the books up and tomorrow I will unpack them. If this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well then, it's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

How's that? We have so many ideas about how it's supposed to be. And here—okay, I'll pack the books up and I'll unpack them, because it's really the presence of love that matters and not where the books are. And so you can feel the kind of deep renunciation that comes in this dimension.

And also what's true is that you can do it. You might think you can't. I remember I was at Esalen years ago. I brought for a program a number of Buddhist teachers there—Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Tartang Tulku and Lama Govinda and all these kind of Buddhist luminaries—and we were all teaching together with Stan Grof and so forth. One of the people I brought was a Korean Zen master named Seung Sahn, or Soen Sa Nim as we used to call him. Some of the folks at Esalen got really enamored of his teaching. He was a wonderful Korean Zen teacher. And this couple who was there became students of his, and he came back another time, and they were very devoted. And then they broke up. You know how it is.

And they were young, but you don't have to be young to break up. But there it is. And it was not easy at all. The woman left him for somebody else, and the man was just inconsolable.

I watched the Zen master, and he was very tender with this man. He touched him on the heart and said, "Difficult. Hold it all with compassion." Nice, lovely kind of response.

Then the Zen master traveled for about eight months to Korea and various temples, and he came back. I happened to be there when he returned. These people were there—what had been his disciples, this couple that had now separated. She was with some other guy.

The Zen master met this man and looked at him and said, "How are you?"

He said, "Oh, still terrible. Such loss. I still feel so bad."

The Zen master said, "Oh, I have a gift for you." He opened his monk's bag and pulled out this beautiful set of beads. "Here, give me your hands." He put the beads in his hands and held them with one hand, looked him in the eye, and smacked him across the face. He shouted, "Let her go!"

We were all like—I didn't learn this in therapy training! Might have been a good move, but they don't teach that. The man was shocked, but I'll tell you, a week later he was done. He just finished it. "All right, I get it."

So you hear these teachings and you think, "Oh yeah, nice for the Buddha or those monks or something." But it actually is possible for you. Not that you deny it, not that you don't feel the grief—which originally the Zen master acknowledged, saying, "Yes, feel compassion, that's painful." But now it's time to start anew.

Renunciation is not possessing people, and even in yourself, not possessing the way it's supposed to be. Then you're free to move with wise relationship.

The third kind of renunciation, particularly helpful in these times, is the renunciation of views—just in case you have them—and opinions.

The Buddha says, well, in the Tao it says the philosopher is wedded to his opponent. They like it, and that's okay, that's a kind of nice thing. But the Buddha says, "Those who cling to their views go about the world annoying others." I find he laughed when he said that.

Half our opinions are really based on fear and misunderstanding anyway. And they change periodically. But we get so filled with what's right and the way things are supposed to be—whether it's political or spiritual or any other way. Then we start to carry our anger and our grudges and our perspective in it. In some way, it undermines the heart. We become full of judgment.

I hate to say it, I wish it weren't true, but your judging part—at least those of you who have a strong judging part—it's been in there since you were a kid. It follows you around and it kind of knows you and says, "Oh yeah, she's not doing that right. You could do that better." It's just in there. No matter how good things go, it's like Dustin Hoffman says: "A good review from the critics is just another stay of execution." You can't really let yourself be happy because the judge is in there in some way.

The thing about views is that you believe them. But they're really only partial. Truth is not given to us in words. Being right—everybody's heard this—would you rather be right or happy?

It doesn't mean that you can't have perspectives and values and carry them, but it's the grasping of them, believing that you have the right way and that you really see it. Who knows, politically, what's going to happen? Who knows, spiritually, what's going to happen?

Who knows what's going to happen in your life? "Don't know mind," which is what Zen Master Seung Sahn called it—Suzuki Roshi called it beginner's mind—is to be willing and able to see things in a fresh fashion. And we need that, perhaps now more than ever.

Peter Matthiessen writes: "Eventually the child's clear eye and heart is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple, free, joyful being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of who we should be and how we think we should be. Not until years later does an instinct come that some vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. And after that day, we become seekers."

There's something about the child of the spirit in you, no matter what views and what you've lived through—something inviolable that can be touched when we let go of views and step more into the mystery of life. You can reflect on that as well.

Spiritual views. People come and say, "My partner doesn't meditate." So what? Maybe you're the one that needs it. Thomas Merton wrote that the beauty of saints is not their sanctity or holiness. This is not what makes a saint holy. What makes a saint holy is the gift that they're given, the gift of sainthood, which is to see the beauty in everyone else. That's what it means.

So this is a different kind of renunciation—the renunciation of your views—to really honor life. And again, even in the practice of metta, which I send everywhere, to political leaders everywhere, some you like, some you don't, whatever your views are: may they be free from hatred, may they live with a heart of compassion. I wish that for them, for every single one, the ones that I might agree with or don't in my own opinions. That's something I could really wish for everyone.

I have a friend who went on a vision quest—you can see how far I have to go here, I'll tell this story. He was a sort of angry guy who got into conflict with people because he had a lot of views and opinions. One of those types, not unlike some people we know—myself and others.

Anyway, he went on this vision quest, ten days at Four Corners, way out in the desert in the Southwest. Very special. He was alone with his little canteen and whatever supplies he had. And he's going on and on, day after day, looking for some vision, and no vision came. It's coming to the last day, and he goes around a corner and sees a rock to sit on. He just sits down on this rock, somewhat disillusioned, disappointed—I came out here to have a vision, no vision came, maybe I'm not so spiritual, whatever the judgment inside says.

And then he noticed that a little ways in front of him were some animal bones, deer bones. And then he looked more closely, and it was sort of odd the way they were configured. And then he looked even more closely, and what he saw was two sets of antlers entangled. During the rutting time, these two deer with antlers had butted heads and somehow locked their antlers together, been unable to get them apart, and eventually had died.

And he said, "Okay, vision's come. And now I see." It was the perfect vision that he needed—to understand the conflict he was having, that he created in his life, and how being locked in his views and conflicts actually kept him entangled with these people.

So you can understand the Buddha's teaching about happiness. Not that we don't see clearly and have discriminating wisdom and understand what our values are. But the attachment—we know, and this is true—it's only temporary, that view. And there are other views. No matter what your view is, there's another view, another angle to see it from. Renunciation of being right. Letting things go.

This is again from the Buddha: "Look how he abused me and beat me, threw me down and robbed me. Perpetuate such thoughts and you live in hatred. Look how he abused me and beat me, threw me down and robbed me. Abandon these thoughts and live in love. In this world, hate never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law."

Here's something pretty serious. It's not like, "Oh, they dissed me," or "They were emotionally distant," or whatever you want to complain about. He abused me, beat me, threw me down, and robbed me.

Are you going to continue? Doesn't mean you don't protect yourself or care for yourself. But when that's over, do you dwell in that kind of loyalty or suffering? Or as the Buddha says, abandon these and move on. Renounce that which causes you suffering and start anew.

"O nobly born," the Buddhist texts begin, "remember who you really are." Remember that you have within you a heart of generosity, of integrity, and of the kind of renunciation—I mean, those kids were struggling to learn it—that gives you a centeredness and a place of stillness or peacefulness or wisdom that you can reside in with the waves of praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain that make up human incarnation. And that's the way you become free.

So renunciation of things, not of our attachment to them. Renunciation of possession of people. Renunciation of your fixed views. And renunciation of fear.

Gandhi said, "Fearlessness is the prerequisite for a genuine spiritual life." And of course, politics works by trying to scare people. You can say it's contemporary, but it's actually been going on for centuries. And so we have fears of the other and terrorism and racism, and all these things sort of intertwine. These people or this circumstance or whatever—you need to be afraid and we'll keep you safe. Fearlessness is that which gives you a whole different level of freedom of heart and spirit.

So here's Gandhi standing up to the entire British Empire and they're throwing him in prison and so forth. And he says, "If you make unjust laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute books. We will never obey them. Award us what punishment you like, we will

put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as if in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffolding and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us. We will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We would gladly die and will not so much as touch you or harm you. But so long as there is life yet in these bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary laws—and we will love you anyway."

So that's a statement of somebody who's fearless. And as I said, quoting Thomas Jefferson last time, one person with courage is a majority. When we remember fearlessness, it empowers us to live in the way that really brings happiness to ourselves and to others.

Fear is an interesting thing because often it's about what hasn't come yet. It's really about the future, all those stories and thoughts. And yet, in fact, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Tell me somebody knows what's really going to happen tomorrow. I mean, you have good guesses, but some days you're wrong, you know.

What will happen? So much mystery. What is love? What is gravity? What will happen politically? What will happen in your family? When will you die? So mysterious. What is consciousness? How did you get to be a human being? People would answer to Zen Master Seung Sahn, "You don't know." He said, "Ah, good. Don't know." You just keep don't know, don't know. So you look fresh and not with your views.

This is also letting go of your fear, and it includes the fear that somehow you're going to fail. Because guess what? You will. Anybody who's worth anything and pays attention—you have success and failure. "I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career," says Michael Jordan. "I lost over three hundred games."

26 times I've been trusted to take the game's winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over again in my life, but I still keep going out on the court. That is why I succeed.

So you fail. But fearlessness is not about success or failure. The freedom of the heart is the ability to enter this world with your care and your love. And that's what brings you happiness. If you're possessed by fear and controlled by it, in some way you lose touch with that freedom that was born into you, that freedom of who you really are.

Looking at stories again. This is from Frank Ostaseski. He said, "I flew to Berlin to teach a workshop on grief and forgiveness. I didn't mention my experience of having gone to the concentration camps, to Birkenau, prior to leading this workshop. It can still be difficult to speak of such things in Germany. As the workshop was ending a day or

two later, however, a woman from the very back of the room stood up and said, 'I've been listening to you talking about forgiveness, but my father was a prisoner in those concentration camps and I could never forgive his killers. My heart is like ice.'"

The whole room went silent. And again, the only appropriate response was to bear witness, just to hold that with a witnessing heart.

Then a woman on the other side of the room raised her hand to speak, and I thought to myself, now the stories of the camps and the grief of these losses will come. She stood and said, "My heart is like ice too. It feels like a stone. My father was a Nazi officer who was a guard in those camps. I know that he killed many people. I can't forgive him."

Silence.

And then these two women did the bravest thing I've ever seen. They made their way across the large conference hall of two hundred people and embraced. They didn't say a word. They didn't have to. They just held each other. Their actions were a clear recognition that they were no longer alone in that pain. And for that moment, their suffering was all of our suffering, and their compassion and forgiveness was all of ours.

To let go of fear is somehow to have a bigger vision of the world. Kabir, a wonderful poet, writes—I'll try and remember it. He says, we sense that there's some spirit that is born into the animals and plants and trees around us. It's the same spirit that gave life to you in your mother's womb. Why do you walk around feeling that you are an orphan? Don't you remember that you belong to it all?

A holy relationship. And a holy relationship means a moment when you hand something to someone or receive it from them or look in their eyes or say a word. A holy relationship is a means of saving time. One instant spent together restores the universe. You can hear it in that story in Germany—one moment of that kind of attention can turn everything around.

And so this kind of renunciation is the renunciation of all the things that hold us back and the willingness to say, as Gandhi did, "I know what matters to me." What mattered in his case was both justice and love. And I will put neither of them down. I will carry them both in the ways that I best can.

Each of you have gifts that you carry to the world. When we sit and meditate, yes, you quiet the mind. Yes, you open and tend the heart and release things. Yes, you can go into vastness and a sense of connection, all of those things. But then the gift from it is to

come back to this world with hands that can plant seeds and nourish and water and tend—not because you're supposed to, but because it's your family, it's who you are. Your gift is really your love.

Maybe the great renunciation in our human life is the renunciation of the way we thought life was supposed to be. And the willingness to love life as it presents itself and then to respond—to add our peace and our gift and our seeds, to open ourselves to the sky and the wind and also to the storms and the rain and the mystery of all of it.

I could read you, and I will, a little poem to end. But I'm contemplating whether to tell this story or not, and I guess I will. Some years ago, I had a friend named Milton Friedman. And Milton Friedman, who has the same name as the great economist who was at the University of Chicago, the very famous conservative economist—

My friend Milton Friedman was a speechwriter in the Senate, and then he worked in the White House long ago during Jimmy Carter's presidency. During that particular time, there was a very high level of inflation. Oil prices spiked, interest rates climbed into the teens and twenties.

One day Milton Friedman was there working on a speech when a phone call came for him. "Is this Milton Friedman?" the caller asked. "Yes, it is," he replied.

It turned out to be a clergy person in one of the largest church communities in America—a whole very large church organization. He was their financial officer as well as a clergy person, and he wanted advice about what to do with the billion or however many dollars that the church had to invest, especially in this fraught economic time.

"We have this many billions," he said, "and I'm calling to see if you have some advice about investment."

My friend Milton Friedman replied, "Have you considered giving it to the poor?"

The man on the other end of the line was a little shocked. "Is this the real Milton Friedman?" he asked.

To which my friend Milton Friedman paused for a moment and said, "Is this the real church?"

He was a witty fellow.

At whatever level we are, actually, these teachings point to what brings happiness to us—the level of integrity that we live with, the level of generosity. Not because you're supposed to be generous, but because it's actually what brings joy and happiness to the

heart. And the level of renunciation so that you can, like those little kids in the video, amid all the storms and pulls of your opinions and others' needs and praise and blame, actually tend your own heart no matter what.

You have a rudder on your boat in the stream. There's some way in which you know how to live that, through these trainings and practices, gives you peacefulness and steadiness and allows you to bring that gift of peacefulness and steadiness to the world that so needs it.

This is from Gensei:

Trailing my stick, I go down to the garden gate.
Fall, winter floods have washed away the planks of the bridge.
Shouldering our sandals, we wade across the narrow stream.
I dabble in the flow,
delighted by the shallowness of the stream,
gaze at the flagging, admiring how firm the stones are under the water.
The point in life is to know what's enough.
Why envy those other world mortals?
With the happiness held in one inch square heart,
you can fill the whole space between heaven and earth.

So let's just sit for a few moments. And as you sit, let yourself reflect. What things is it time to let go of? To give away, to sell, to offer to the poor, to give to someone else. To release. And what people is it time to release? And what opinions and ideas and views would it help to release, to rest in mystery and a trusting heart?

I thank you for your kind attention. It's lovely to be able to remind myself, because every time I teach I'm also talking to myself. *Jack, yes, listen, remember this, it's good.* I hope something of this touches you in a way that's of benefit, and perhaps we'll see you again.

Good night. Drive carefully out there on the wet roads. Be polite with one another. It's crowded. Good night.

CHAPTER 9

The Tender Heart of Life and Death

Jack Kornfield · 2h07

> *In this deeply moving talk, Jack Kornfield welcomes longtime friend and Zen Hospice Project co-founder Frank Ostaseski to explore the intimate relationship between life and death. Kornfield shares his recent experience accompanying his twin brother through his final days with leukemia, describing how he meditated aloud to communicate the dimensions of presence—from the body's coldness and resistance to death, to the tenderness of the heart, to the vastness of awareness itself.*
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> *Ostaseski offers his "Five Invitations" distilled from sitting with over two thousand dying people: don't wait, welcome everything and push away nothing, bring your whole self to the experience, find a place of rest in the middle of things, and cultivate don't-know mind. Both teachers acknowledge how they've "flunked the course"—Kornfield facing a misdiagnosis, Ostaseski recovering from a heart attack—discovering that the body doesn't want to die even as awareness remains spacious.*
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> *The dialogue weaves together Buddhist teachings on dukkha, the Four Noble Truths, and the brahmavihāras with universal wisdom about impermanence. Through stories of hospice patients—from a heroin user wanting to "come back as Jackie" to a marginalized woman writing her death poem—they illuminate how ordinary people discover extraordinary compassion when facing mortality. The teaching emphasizes that freedom, love, and presence are available now, not after years of practice, and that recognizing our interconnection transforms how we live each precious moment.*

Good evening.

It's a pleasure to welcome you here to this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock. If we haven't met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and I'm here with my longtime good friend, Frank Ostaseski. I'm very pleased to share the night with you.

How many of you are here for the first time, just to know? Welcome. It's a particular pleasure to welcome you here. And if you saw a hand go up near you of someone who's new, when we get to the break, turn and introduce yourself to that person or welcome them.

Monday Night Sitting group has been ongoing now for thirty-two years. I keep track because it's the same age as my daughter. And Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley here through a whole community that's committed to the twin principles of

wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, and of compassion. We received this beautiful land from the Nature Conservancy, asking us to steward and take care of it, and gradually the whole community itself has created and built this as a lovely retreat for people to come and quiet their minds and tend their hearts. We have all kinds of trainings and retreats—day long, week long, month long—for families, for educators, for special kinds of programs, for people in healthcare and all kinds of other areas. Frank also has been part of some of our wonderful programs.

Mostly what we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We sit for about half an hour, which I think we'll do tonight, with a little bit of instruction just for those who are new or as a reminder. Then we take a break, stretch or relax for a little bit, and come back together for some teachings, which will be both stories and teachings and some dialogue that we share.

It's so spring out there. It's pretty amazing to walk this land or other parts and feel, with the wild amount of water that we've had, how everything is just dancing and bursting open. The grass is saying, "Yes, me too," and everything is insanely green. Maybe it's a time for us also to kind of breathe and quiet down and let that spring come in inside ourselves.

Again, I'm very happy that you're here. Do you want to say hello, anything?

Frank: Just how delighted I am to be here with you, and how beautiful it is to have the green. We were commenting on the way up that here we are, almost in May, and we're still green. Fantastic. So good that we can have all that liveliness as a counterposition to our discussion tonight about death. They go together, don't they? Package deal.

Jack: That's it. So let's begin with some meditation practice.

Find a way to sit in which your body is comfortable and yet also alert. If you're in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Have some sense of dignity, sitting upright, but also gracious—like the king or queen on the throne. Present, easy on the cushions, however you sit. Let your body be at ease. You don't have to get in any kind of weird posture. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it from your spiritual practice.

When you've taken your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this mysterious human form, this human incarnation, you're ready to let your eyes close gently and just come into the present. Simple mindfulness or loving awareness of what is present here and now.

As you tune into your body, if there are any areas of obvious tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. You can roll your head in a circle if you like to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Relax the shoulders and let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body and how gravity pulls you into contact with the chair, the floor, the cushion, and how the earth can completely support you. You can relax and let go in this seat on the earth. Let your belly be soft and breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to pay attention to the play of experience—what's present in body and heart and mind as you sit quietly, bringing attention to the aliveness of the moment, all that comes and goes.

After just a minute or two, you begin to notice how easily the attention drifts off to commentary and planning and remembering in other places.

So to deepen the sense of presence underneath the waves of thoughts and plans and remembering and sounds and ideas, become aware of the wave of the breath—how under all these things the body is breathing itself. Feel it wherever you can most easily: the coolness in the nostrils, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's helpful, if it's hard to feel the breath, simply put your hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall in the palm of your hand for this sitting time.

As you rest with each breath coming in and out, let the sensations of breathing invite a quieting and calming of attention. Just this breath, breath by breath.

And again, after just a minute or two, you notice how the waves of thoughts and sounds and sensations pull the attention away from the breath. Quite natural. When you can be with the breath, let these waves rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. When one of the waves becomes quite strong and pulls you, then let go of attention to breath and, as if to greet it with the same loving awareness, as if with a bow, acknowledge it—the feelings of sadness or excitement, longing, joy, or the thoughts: planning, remembering, or the sounds. As you name it gently, feel the energy of this wave move through the body and mind. Then when it subsides, when you're at ease with it, return back to feel a few more breaths.

Rest just here with each breath, or with the strong waves met with a kind attention. Rest in the reality of the present. Remember to keep the heart tender, to touch all that arises with the spirit of compassion. This breath, breathing itself. Or this moment's experience arising like a wave—sensations, feelings, thoughts—then passing away. You rest in stillness in the midst of it all.

Whatever is present, relax around it. The breath breathes itself. The sensations, the feelings, thoughts that arise come into the space of loving awareness, of mindfulness. Let them come as they come, go as they go. You are the witnessing, the kind attention that sees just what's here. This breath, this moment's experience, receive with loving awareness. Relax, present, easy and calm with each breath.

Now one little thing to say about meditation, especially mindfulness meditation. You sit and I talk about relaxing and calming, but it's not always that way. It's actually kind of wild in there.

There was this one Zen master with whom I trained years ago. There were all these ardent students in the 1970s asking, "When are we going to get enlightened? We've heard about the Zen awakening and all these things." And he would say, "You practice, you train, and soon you will get everything." We thought, well, we'll get all those good things, right? But after a year or two or three or however long of practice, it started to dawn on us that when he said, "You practice sincerely, you're present, you will get everything," that's really what you get when you sit. You get everything.

You get the unfinished business of the heart and the tears that want to come. You get the achiness of the body. You also get to hold it with compassion and tenderness. You get joy, the spring, but also the death of people that you love. All of that comes, and as you sit halfway between heaven and earth, you become the Buddha that you are, allowing all this to be received with a great heart of compassion and understanding.

So just to be clear about this, in case you had some ideas about what was going to happen.

And the last announcement is that on Saturday, the 29th, at Lake Merritt in Oakland, the coalition of Bay Area Buddhist groups are having a sit-in and a stand-in for climate and justice. A lot of the Spirit Rock teachers—Wes and James Barras, Donald Mark—will all be there. They won't be speaking because everybody's going to be silent. But there will be a great gathering of people sitting and afterward networking for climate justice.

Those are announcements. Take a little bit of a break. It's great that there's a little baby here. How old? Three weeks. This is a dharma baby getting the first taste in the temple. Well, welcome. How nice.

So please take a break for a bit. And my new book, and maybe Frank's, are out there for anyone who's interested.

Let's just sit quiet for one minute to let the cocktail party settle down just a little bit here. You don't even have to close your eyes.

So we talked about each of us speaking for ten, fifteen minutes or something and then see where it goes. Some kind of dialogue, storytelling, disagreements if we're lucky, whatever.

And it's also true that just about now we each have new books that have come out. Frank's *Five Invitations* and Jack's *No Time Like the Present*. This one's really good. Have you read it? I read excerpts. Yeah, right. That's what they say. You leaf through it. There's good stuff you missed in there. Anyway. I'm going to get myself a copy of that.

And it turns out, when I look at them—it's not that we're going to do book reading, we're going to do some teaching—but one of the things that strikes me in looking at both these books, and I love your book, by the way, I think it's really quite a magnificent book. Thank you. Congratulations. It's very cool.

What strikes me is that there's a very similar message in both books. And Frank can talk about his own with the subtitle, "Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully," and what does it mean to live a full life. And *No Time Like the Present*, the subtitle is "Finding Freedom, Joy, Love Right Where You Are."

I started by talking about how we can have a vision—an understandable one—of spiritual life as a development. You learn different practices and trainings, and you become more present and kinder and more insightful and wiser and so forth.

But often in that model, there's something out in the future that if you do it right, you'll get to, and then you'll be wise or good or whatever enlightened vision you have of a person. And so it's always something ahead.

What I say in this book, especially after all these years of teaching, is that there's another perspective which is called starting with the fruit, or starting with the result—living the fruit—in which you don't have to wait to be free. What's also true for us, yes these trainings are enormously helpful, but in any moment we can be truly present, we can be loving, we can be free. And no one can take that from us. That's our birthright. That is our true nature. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And so there's some kind of commonality in the themes of these books. Yes, there's understanding and insight—we call this insight meditation. As you quiet the mind and open the heart, you get to experience the unbearable beauty of life. And you also get the ocean of tears. The war, the racism, the problems with the climate, all kinds of things like that. And they can't be separated. The problem is when you open, you get it all, as said before the break. And that's part of what it means to be a genuine human being, or a wise or a loving human being—to grow your capacity to be present for this human incarnation in its mystery in an open-hearted way.

I felt this very strongly in these last weeks because I was back east. I was back east a lot this year because my twin brother had been quite sick over the last couple of years with myelofibrosis and leukemia—stem cell transplant and a million transfusions and chemotherapy and so forth. And he died a couple of weeks ago.

I was back there with him for quite a bit of the time until the day before he died, where I had to go somewhere else, and it also felt right to leave. We were pretty complete. He ended up being home for the last couple of weeks, but then he was struggling some, so they moved him to the hospital where they could give him IV morphine and help him. For the last night he had his two daughters, and they sat up on either side and held his hand. It was exactly the right thing. He was ready after all he'd gone through. And they were there to hold him. Very, very touching.

He was a kind of adventurer. He was literally a member of the Explorers Club—the people who go to the South Pole and the North Pole and the moon and all those things. Those guys. I asked him if they would allow inner explorers. He said no.

He was a scientist, a biologist who studied the genomes of the great lakes of the world like Baikal and Lake Titicaca in the Andes and Lake Malawi. But as he got closer to death and as we got time to really sit together, it was clear he wasn't that interested in meditation, and I wasn't going to foist that on him—spare your friends and family. But I somehow wanted to communicate with him something of what I knew. And it was especially powerful to me because he is a twin. He's an identical twin. There's a kind of closeness.

So I was sitting there with him in the last days, and I said, "You know, I think I'm going to meditate out loud a little bit so you just kind of know what I'm doing inside." And I didn't quite know what I would experience. But as I sat there, I said, "I'm tuning in as I sit with you"—and he was pretty thin and weak and all the things that happen at the end of a long bout with cancer—"and the first thing I notice as I tune into my body is that it's cold. I feel that coldness all the way in the perineum, in my pelvis and genitals, and then it radiates out." I said, "I feel death in my body."

And we talked about him dying. I said, "You're coming close to death, but as your twin, I also feel it. And I can feel with it, the coldness, I can feel contraction, fear, resistance, all those kinds of things that can accompany the body which doesn't really want to die."

And so I just kind of began to track that and describe it to him. I sat for a bit. And I said, "But then my attention gets drawn further up in my body, not where it's so cold and dead."

And I find myself then drawn to the heart. And I looked at him and I said, I feel so much love for you. We don't talk in this way in our family. I said, but you know, here we are, it's about time. And there was a kind of tenderness in it.

If you've sat with people who are dying, especially those that are close to you, at some point you get to look in their eyes. And there are things that you can't even say in words that are so tender, and you feel lost, like I'm never going to see this person again in this way. So it's both heartbreak and also this beautiful, deep kind of love or communion.

And we just sat and looked at each other, and I said, this is the next part of my meditation of attention—just to see, to see you, see this person I lived my whole life with. And that I'm not going to see in this form again. Tears and presence. And we sat that way for a bit.

And I said, and now my attention is opening up as it does in meditation. And I feel a sense of space and vastness of just awareness itself, like the sky, which isn't limited to my body or your body, but it's really what we are. We are awareness. What do you think was born into that body of yours, by the way, in the womb? You think you're only made of hamburgers or oatmeal or whatever it is that you grew up on. I mean, you're something more than that. The spirit came into this life and it will leave.

And I said, and now I'm experiencing as if I can look at you and see our whole life past. There we were in the womb together, these little embryos and then these little babies that got born, and there we were together in the crib. I actually had a dream a few days after he died that he was next to me in bed, and it was like being back in the womb or in the crib or something. It was very comforting. He said he's okay, which I was glad about—whether it's true or not, I don't know, but it was a lovely dream.

And I said, there's this vastness, and I see you, and then I see our dance. I see the dance of this particular human incarnation that we're given so much time. And he said to me, you know, one of us has to go first, so I guess it's me.

And I looked at him, and I remembered when he was eight years old. When he was eight years old, I was eight years old. When we were eight years old, we were living in Buffalo. And it was a huge, bitter snowstorm, windy, cold. And we went out to play all wrapped up the way you do in the cold as kids. And I was skinny as a rail and shaking and freezing, and he was much bigger and more robust—he played football. And he was this adventurer.

He looked at me and he said, it's not cold. And he took off his hat. He said, it's not cold. He took off his scarf. Then he took off his jacket. Then he took off his shirt until he was stripped naked to the waist. And he started dancing around. He said, you think it's cold. It's not cold. And it was beautiful. It was some kind of transmission or teaching about his spirit.

So I was sitting there remembering that and seeing all the things that we lived through—our children and marriages and adventures together. And I said, well, this incarnation may be ending, but I'll share a womb with you again anytime. And I said, let's rest in this, let's rest in the vastness and the mystery of it.

Later we talked about what happens when you die, which Frank and I have some disagreements about, but we'll get to that in a little bit.

What was there in this conversation was both the mystery—the mystery of being alive as a human being, the mystery of the vastness and of awareness or consciousness itself. Because when you're near death, the gates between the worlds open. You see in some vaster way. There was a lot of tenderness and also a kind of wedding.

I hope you can hear this because it's so important to understand in our lives that you need to remember your true nature—the undying spirit, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it—and your zip code, basically, that you have a physical body and you have this particular life and incarnation and you have to tend it. And the dance is somehow to hold all those pieces: the coldness and the death and the enormous love and the vast vision that says, here we are going through human incarnation. How is it going for you? Oh, you're going to be dying soon. Well, I'll be following you.

And it was both mysterious and beautiful and tender and tragic—all those things that we know when things are really close to the heart. And of course, the people all around him did what they did. Some were easy and attentive, and some were completely freaked out and frightened and so forth. And that's also the way that it is. People do what they do around death.

I have to say, one of my favorite stories in your book—and I'm actually going to read one story from your book.

It's all right. I'll use it in talks later. Thief, you know. So I'm assessed.

One of my favorite stories is about Jillian, who brought her mother who had dementia home to live with her. Jillian walked into the living room—she had gotten a caregiver for her mother while she was working and publishing, whatever she was doing. She came home and in the living room found her library, all her beloved books including sacred Buddhist texts, scattered across the floor. And her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty old books, I'm going to give them to my dentist."

So you get a little sense of the dementia there. And Jillian was momentarily trapped by her anger. She scolded the attendant: "How could you let this happen?" All that. And the attendant, who wasn't caught up in that drama, said, "Ma'am, today I packed the books up and tomorrow I will unpack them. And if this gives a sense of control to a woman who's lost so much, well then it's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

There's so much tenderness in that reply. It's such a beautiful story. And people will do what they do. Our game is not to try to perfect the world or other people or save them. You'll notice they don't want you to save them, particularly those in your family. "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all," it says in Zen. But your family members are not interested in that. The game is not really to perfect them or even yourself. It's to perfect your love. It's to be able to show up in some way that's genuine and loving for this mystery.

And it's so mysterious. It takes six million grains of pollen to seed one peony. How does that happen? And there you were, some tiny little one cell—or maybe two little cells came together—and then poof, a new incarnation. How does that happen? So it's so mysterious and beautiful. And there aren't ideals about the way that it's supposed to be as much as there is the practice that we do. And I could feel it sitting with my brother, sitting with a lot of people who've died. You've done that much more than I. What it meant to be able to bring that presence to all those dimensions at the same time.

I liked how you started out talking about all these words that we use—awakening and realization and enlightenment—they all feel very far off. And I liked that you were talking about the emphasis of your book starting from the fruit of practice.

I don't even use this word mindfulness so much anymore. When people ask me what my practice is...

Because you don't want to pay the royalties?

Yeah. Well, mindfulness is the new black, you know. It's suitable for all occasions, it seems. But anyway, what I say my practice is, is intimacy. Really learning to be intimate with myself and with the world. And what you described with your brother is that. It was a beautiful attunement to yourself, but also to him.

And this intimacy was really expressed so beautifully by you. I thought that was lovely.

Life and death are intimate. They're a package deal—you can't pull them apart. In Japanese Zen, there's a beautiful expression: *shoji*. It's usually translated as one word: birth-death. Nothing separating the two except a small hyphen, a thin line. A life that doesn't really include death is only half a life. There's this intimacy that's always present, yet we're constantly trying to pull them apart, to compartmentalize them. But I wonder what it would be like if instead we invited it in—invited death in to see what it had to offer us.

I say that death is not at the end of a long road, at the end of an illness, but in the marrow of every passing moment. She's the secret teacher hiding in plain sight, showing us what matters most.

We have this idea that at the time of our death, we'll do the work then. But to imagine that we will have the strength of body, the emotional stability, the mental clarity at that time of our life to do the work of a lifetime—it's a ridiculous gamble. One of the reasons I wrote the book was that I saw so many people coming to this moment with so much fear and distress and regret. I wanted to encourage us to step into a relationship with death much earlier in our lives.

To give you some background, I was the co-founder of something called the Zen Hospice Project that we started thirty years ago. We didn't really know what we were doing. It just seemed to us that there was this match between people who were cultivating what we could call the listening heart in meditation practice and people who needed to be heard at least once in their lives—people who were dying. We didn't have much more of a plan than that. Really, that was it.

We worked mostly on the streets, with folks who lived in Tenderloin hotels, a section of San Francisco. I changed a lot of diapers on park benches behind City Hall. Over the course of the years, I've probably sat with a couple of thousand people who died. All kinds of people. People from cultures I didn't understand, speaking languages I didn't know. People with great faith, others who'd sworn off religion years ago.

There was Nguyen, a Vietnamese man who was scared of ghosts. And his roommate Isaiah, an African-American man who was deeply comforted by visits from his dead mother. There they were, sharing a room together. There were people who had intact families and good health insurance. And there were people who lived on the margins of society. People who were clear as bells. Others who couldn't remember their own name.

There was a man I knew who had contracted the HIV virus from a blood transfusion. But the year before, he had disowned his gay son who was diagnosed with HIV. Now they were in twin beds in the same room, being cared for by Agnes—the husband's wife and the son's mother. There was Alex, who got so confused one night he climbed out onto his fire escape and froze to death.

Some of them really opened and blossomed and discovered a kindness they'd always wanted their whole lives. Other people turned toward the wall in withdrawal and depression and never came back again. All of them are my teachers. Anything I have of value to offer came from them.

A few years ago, I was teaching a retreat for doctors and nurses on compassion, and in the middle of it I had a heart attack. I went through surgery and all that. But what was interesting was that for the months after, almost every night I had dreams of the people I'd taken care of. They would come to me in the dreams—sometimes they would just sit with me, other times they'd give me advice, sometimes they'd say thank you. It was a clear lesson about how the relationship continues even after someone has died. Maybe especially so when it's our twin.

A few years ago, Bill Moyers invited me to come back to New York with a bunch of other people to talk about this film he was making about dying in America. I wrote this very salient talk—I felt quite proud of it. I got there and I was on this panel with all these silver-tongued devils, and they took up all the time.

And I never got to deliver my talk. Bill, who I knew from something else, grabbed me and said, "Could you just talk for a few minutes?" On the airplane there, somewhere over Kansas, I had tried to write down a few key things that I thought were really important, and they became the five invitations. What are the five things I've learned from people who are dying that have value?

The first was: don't wait. Don't wait to tell someone you love that you love them.

The second was: welcome everything, push away nothing. Jack and I were just talking a moment ago about this beautiful James Baldwin documentary that's out, *I Am Not Your Negro*. It's a beautiful film. In it he says something really extraordinary: "Not

everything that can be faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed unless it's faced." To welcome everything doesn't mean we have to like it all. We just have to be willing to meet it.

The third was: bring your whole self to the experience. We think it's our strength or our expertise that will help others, but often it's—well, I felt for myself—it was the things I was sometimes most ashamed of, the parts of myself I most wanted to hold in some hidden corner of my life, that in fact became the very thing that allowed me to build an empathetic bridge to the other person's experience. So I had to bring it all: my strength and my clarity, but also my fear and my helplessness.

The fourth: find a place of rest in the middle of things. We think we'll find rest when we go on retreats or vacation or when our list gets checked off. My list never gets checked off. So I have to find a way of resting right in the middle of what I'm doing. That's what this practice is all about—helping us to find a place of rest right here, right now.

And the last one was to cultivate don't-know mind. I felt it was important to put something Zen-like in this list. I remember my son saying to me, "What the hell does that mean, Dad?" But to cultivate don't-know mind is to cultivate a mind of wonder, of curiosity, of openness, of receptivity, of readiness. It's not to encourage ignorance. Ignorance isn't just not knowing. Ignorance is misperception—I know something, but it's the wrong thing, and I believe it really strongly.

So those are the five invitations. I found that these were my guides for many years in working with folks who were dying. But then I thought, well, they have a relevance for all of us—for living a life of integrity and meaning and love. I feel very grateful that people let me come up close and personal with death. They really showed me how to live by doing that. I feel very, very grateful to all my teachers, two thousand of them that I had.

So, that's a little something we can start out with. But let's visit a little bit and see what else we want to chat about.

Jack Kornfield: There are a couple of things—a kind of overarching statement and then a question. What you're describing, there are parallels in what I've written about, that the place where you end up, as T.S. Eliot says, after all our journeying and voyaging, will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time, in the *Quartets*. The goal is actually to be where we are in this mystery, but with open heart and clear-eyed in some way.

What I'm hearing, in a much more universal language, is also what's traditionally structured in Buddhist teachings—the Four Noble Truths: there's suffering and its causes, which is our clinging and our resistance and our fear; and the possibility of freedom wherever we are; and the path to that being the willingness to be intimate, present, compassionate. Or I'm hearing the four dimensions of the awakened heart: of love; and compassion when there's pain, but not ending the story with that; of having joy as well; and finally equanimity, or peace.

These fundamental teachings are expressed so immediately and in such a universal way, not as Buddhist teachings—because they're not, really. They're just the way it is in human life. And I think it's part of what's happening here in the West, that these beautiful teachings and trainings and practices of mindfulness and compassion, empathy and forgiveness, now researched by five thousand papers and studies and neuroscientists, in schools and clinics and businesses—they're getting out there, but not as Buddhist practices. Rather, as trainings that are really our birthright, that are part of our human nature. And your being close to death, in a way, shines that light of presence and attention that reveals them so naturally. So that's one comment to make.

And then I want to ask a question about not being idealistic, about flunking the course, basically. Because I have.

"Yeah, me too."

And how has that been for you?

Well, as I mentioned earlier, I had a heart attack. It wasn't somebody else that was near death. You know, the view from the other side of the sheets is a really different view. And here I was, Mr. Hospice. There was a lot of pressure to do this right. I had people all over the country, all over the world wondering how he's going to do it. I used to think I knew something about dying until I had my own heart attack. Then I realized how little I knew, actually. And I became much more humble. That was a good thing.

"Good for your family, anyway."

I'll tell you a story. I just ran into Eugene on the pathway—Eugene Cash. Some of you know Eugene. He's a dear friend of both of ours. Right after my surgery, I was in the cardiac care unit, intubated. I had this long, several-hour surgery, triple bypass. And I was thinking about how our practice is—when you were guiding us in our practice, you were helping us attend to the body and breath. But sometimes I think we get too fixed on the body and breath. It won't always be there for us. And so we have to open beyond the body and breath.

So I'm in this cardiac care unit and I'm intubated, I can't speak. That means I've got hoses coming out of every orifice. Eugene's there with me and my son. Into the room comes a respiratory therapist and he says, "Let's pull out that tube and see if you can breathe." That's how he introduced himself. I waved like this—I could feel, they had actually damaged my left lung in the surgery, and I could feel my left lung wasn't working. So I wrote on a piece of paper, "I'm scared."

Eugene, very no-nonsense guy, said, "Frank, sense your body."

I tried to sense my body, but I could only feel up to my knees. Then he said, "Find your breath, find your breath." But I couldn't. I couldn't tell the difference between the machine and my own breathing.

In that moment, I remembered one of my other great teachers, Suzuki Roshi. The night before Suzuki Roshi was dying—a great Zen master who turned the wheel of Dharma in America and changed the whole way the Dharma is experienced here—the night before he was dying, he wanted to take a bath. Okasan, his wife, said, "No, no, no." But he insisted, and so Otohiro, his son, picked up his father and carried him to the tub. As he started to lower him into the warm bath water, Suzuki Roshi became terrified. He was afraid he would drown. Otohiro said to him, "Father, calm yourself. Find your breath, find your body." And gradually, Suzuki Roshi was able to do that.

But in that moment in the cardiac care unit, I thought: if Suzuki Roshi can be scared, I can be scared.

Then I grabbed Eugene by the shirt. We were like this—I pulled him close to me and put my ear right next to his cheek. Somehow he understood that what I needed was to follow the rhythm of his breath. Which I did. He lent me his breath until I could find my own again.

And my son slipped his hand in against my chest. And it was like a conduit from God. There was so much love. And then I could say to the respiratory therapist, okay, okay, now you can take out the tube.

I think we can have idealized notions about practice and our dying and who we think we're supposed to be. What I've learned from other folks who are dying and from my own experiences is that this is all we have. This is who we are—not just this, as Jack said, not just this sinew and bones, but this is who we are. This is what we have to rely on. And we can keep discovering greater and greater dimensions of ourselves that become increasingly more reliable.

About six or seven years ago, I was teaching in front of a big group of people, and then I fell over and passed out. I was unconscious for a pretty long time—a minute, minute and a half. It was pretty long. When I came to, there were like eight doctors all peering down at me who had rushed up. Then I went to get scans and all the kinds of things they do, because the next day something similar happened. Then I started to get pretty serious tremors. I still have a bit of a tremor, but they were much worse then—and numbness and tingling and cold in my body along with all these tremors.

After some tests, I went to see this doctor. I was misdiagnosed. He said, "Well, you have this thing sort of like ALS." It was happening pretty quickly because it had now been a couple or a few weeks. I went with my daughter to this appointment. And he said, "Given how rapid this is happening, what I suspect will happen is that your body will fall apart over these next few months in the way that it is. And with it will come dementia."

Now, I was thinking of a different kind of death. And dementia wasn't on my menu, you know. It scared me also. I went out and told my daughter, who was waiting for me, and she just started to weep. She said, "Daddy, I want you to be here for my children," and all the things—you know, the people that love you the most.

Fortunately, it was a misdiagnosis and it wasn't true. But I too thought, oh, I'd sat in the charnel grounds in the monastery, chanted over bodies, done all the death meditation, sat with people. You know, I'm chill with death, right? Okay. The body doesn't want to die. There's something in it organically that's true. It clings to life.

I had this really interesting experience when I came back from being in the monastery for those years. I disrobed and started to live a modern life. I was driving down the freeway in Massachusetts and a tractor trailer lost a big piece of its tire on the freeway in front of me. One car crashed into it, another—it was really something—and I had to swerve to get around it. Fortunately I wasn't part of that accident, though some people were hurt in terrible ways.

There were two things going on. One part of me, partly because I'd just been in some years of retreat, was extremely spacious and calm. Like, "Oh, interesting. Maybe I'm about to die. Wonder what will happen." Just peaceful witness. And my body grabbed the steering wheel and yanked it this way and said, "Not today, baby." Both of those were happening at the same time.

I talked to Ram Dass about it. He said, "Oh, I flunked the course a lot of times."

But this is part of the reality of being human—that our body has a certain life and it needs to be respected. Our heart and our love have a certain life that needs to be respected. And then, as you sit in quiet silence, the mind open, the heart open, there's also a sense of something bigger and more mysterious that is who you really are—that you're part of this vastness.

As Alice Walker writes—I love this passage—she said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it come to me. Being a part of everything. And I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I ran all around the house because when it happens you just can't miss it."

There's something in us that knows this is true—whether it's walking in the high mountains or making love or listening to an extraordinary piece of music or sitting at the bedside of someone dying or someone being born, which is equally wild. Out of your body or someone else's body—oh, here's a new person. Okay. We touch something, those gates open, and we realize that it's not just our to-do list or the roles that we carry. Somehow we all know this very, very deeply.

And part of the grace of the work that you and I both get to do—in hospice work and in this work of people's practice of opening with intimacy—is to invite that presence in whatever way we can. And to know that it's not an ideal. It's the full picture.

I mean, when I'm dying, I want somebody next to me who knows what the hell they're doing. I want good pain management. I want symptom control. I don't want somebody coming and just chanting over me.

But that won't be enough.

Right, you also want someone to breathe in your ear.

Exactly—I was going to say that. So that won't be enough. The other thing I want is somebody who's comfortable in a territory of meaning, who can help me figure out what the purpose and value of this life has been. I want to explore that with somebody. I need someone who's comfortable in that territory.

But there's a juncture in the dying process where that's not important anymore. Meaning falls away. And we're still talking to Grandma about her favorite piece of music and how she used to like to ride the roller coaster at Coney Island. But Grandma's someplace else now. Grandma's entering into this territory of mystery that you're speaking of. This is the land of unanswerable questions. And in this land, I think, we're all adventurers—like your brother. We bear witness more than anything else, more than provide any kind of answers.

You don't do that? You don't tell them what will happen?

I'm more interested in what they think is going to happen.

Well, he said he was going to become dirt. He's a scientist.

How do you respond to that?

Well, I had the guy who was the head of the California Atheist Association come to die with us at Zen Hospice. I was very proud that he felt we weren't going to push any dogma on him. And I asked him—I ask everybody—what do you think is going to happen after you die? Everybody's got a story. We all have a story. And that story is shaping the way in which we die, and I think also the way in which we live our lives.

So I said to this guy, what's going to happen after you die? He said, "Nothing." And I said, well, what kind of nothing? Like, will you have ears? Will you smell things? "No, you don't have no ears." I said, is it like a dial tone? He said, "No, no, no, no. You're molecules and you mix with all the other molecules in the universe." I said, oh, *that* kind of nothing. That's beautiful.

But then there was another guy. We had this guy, Jackie. He was a thirty-year heroin user. African-American guy. I loved him dearly. And I said, Jackie—you know, he was at Zen Hospice, right?

This guy had come in off the streets. And I said, "So Jackie, here you are at this Buddhist hospice. Do you think you're going to get born again?" And he said, "Yep." I said, "Well, what are you going to come back as?" He said, "Jackie." I said, "Well, why do you want to be Jackie? You could be something else. You could be a king or a queen. In some cultures you can come back as a cow—that's very sacred, you know."

And he said, "I'm not coming back as no goddamn cow. I'm coming back as Jackie."

I said, "How come?"

He said, "Because next time I'm going to get it right."

And now we're having a different conversation. If I had told him what was going to happen, we wouldn't have had that exchange.

I don't know—I mean, I have my own views and beliefs. But I don't hold on too tightly.

There was a woman, a wonderful Christian Scientist, ninety years old, ready for dying. She said to me, "I just want to put my head down in the lap of Jesus." Then her granddaughter came to visit and said, "Grandma, I read a book at this spiritual center in Woodacre. You don't have to worry, because when you die, everybody who's died before you will be there to meet you."

And Grandma became terrified. Her husband Edgar had been beating her most of her life. He had died five years before. The idea of spending eternity with Edgar was not appealing at all. You can't divorce your ex in the afterlife—it's too hard.

So I'm just saying that I don't impose my ideas. I explore with people. I inquire with them and see what their story is. And then we see whether or not that's a helpful story.

On occasion, I do tell people what's going to happen. I did with my brother. I said, "You're a scientist, right? Scientists do experiments. They have a hypothesis. They're open-minded and they learn from it. So you think you're just going to turn into dirt." I said, "It might be so. But it's also possible, based on some potential data for you to consider."

I told him: first of all, the majority of people around the world, across cultures, understand that you're not limited to your body. That's a belief found everywhere. Then there's my own experience—I've had out-of-body experiences in meditation and learned to do that. I've sat with people who are dying, and when they're close to death they go out of their body and see light, or become light, and come back and describe it. There's all the near-death literature. I've led past life regressions in Asia and Europe. People who believe and people who don't—it doesn't matter. If you have a group of thirty or forty people and you do this regression, half of them or more remember some

And it's not like Cleopatra. It's more like being a foot soldier in Crimea or being a farmer somewhere in South America, sometime long ago in Peru. And the people who have those experiences are not necessarily the ones who believed in them beforehand. Then if I progress them forward to what it was like to die in that life, they feel the pain of dying and the loss, and then they feel themselves liberated and free, and there's these states in between.

So I don't know. You have to be open-minded. But I said to my brother, it's possible that as you die, you'll find yourself leaving your body, that you might experience light. And he was also an amateur Egyptologist, so I decided to read him from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, because that was his language. He didn't want the Tibetans. But okay, there's Maat, there's the feather from Maat, and there's the scale, and your soul will be

judged in this way. And I read it, and I said, whether you take it literally or metaphorically, there's some way in which there's a kind of reckoning—okay, I've died, wow, what was that one about? Some sense of life review that happens, as people describe.

So I just sort of went over that territory with him, not expecting him to believe it particularly. But I did say, "If it happens, remember, I told you so." You know, we're twins. What can you do? Brothers, right? Who's going to be there at the time of your dying to say, "I told you so"?

My father used to say, "It can't be too bad—no one's come back to complain." He didn't know about the Buddhists at that point. I don't know. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when somebody asked him what was going to be reborn, said, "Mostly your bad habits." It's not a pretty picture from him.

That said, we were talking about Bly's translation of Kabir's poems: what's found now is found then. And that's what interests me—how do we take this whole exploration and bring it into this very life, this moment of our life? How can we use that to inform how we lead our lives now?

The two questions people inevitably form in one way or another when they're dying are: Am I loved? Did I love well? Those are the two big questions, in one fashion or another, that are asked. And why should we wait until the time of our death to answer that question? Do we need to wait until we die to rest in peace? Or can we find it now? This is what interests me. If what Trungpa was saying is that habit is what's reborn, then let's cultivate habits that bring us to our wholeness and happiness and the four flavors of love.

I think of the phrase "the habits of the heart." Somebody asked my teacher Ajahn Chah, "What is the Dharma?" Because dharma is this multi-meaning word in Sanskrit that means teachings and truth and so forth. And he said, "The Dharma is the heart." This is the way that you live in the world.

And we don't live in isolation in this. For most people, whether they had any religious practice or not in their life, if you ask somebody what's most important to them, inevitably they would say their relationships, in one fashion or another. It could be their relationship with nature, their relationship with their family. We don't do this life alone. We can't do it alone.

We have a mutual friend, Bernie Glassman, a great Zen teacher. He was talking in Germany about Avalokiteshvara, this Tibetan form of Buddha, this deity depicted sometimes as having a thousand arms. And in each hand, in some depictions, there's an ear

to hear the cries of the world, and a thousand arms to respond. Bernie was talking about this in Germany, and a man raised his hand. He said, "It's a very nice metaphor. It's beautiful, but I have only two arms." And Bernie said, "I'm sorry, you're mistaken."

And the man said, no, I'm quite sure I have just two arms. And Bernie said, I don't think so. I don't think so.

And then he had everybody in the room raise both their arms. Go ahead, do it. Just go ahead. Look around. This is Avalokiteshvara. This is our life.

We can't do this alone. It's a ludicrous idea to think that we die alone, that we practice alone, that this sitting practice we do is just for our own benefit. We're always wrapped up, tangled up in everything else. And that often is what shows itself in the time of dying.

Ordinary people, people like you and I, many people who have no spiritual practice, regularly find themselves—as you're describing to your brother—feeling a kind of expansiveness, becoming something more than the small separate self they had taken themselves to be. And to really trust that in the dying process, particularly the process that comes with long-term illness, is conducive to this. It's helpful to this.

And it's a process of stripping away. The ways in which we've defined ourselves are either stripped away by illness or gracefully given up, but they all go. They all go. And then we find, often, something much more fundamental, much more reliable than all of our constructions.

When I write in this new book about the different dimensions of freedom—the freedom to love, the freedom to forgive, the freedom to start over, the freedom to be yourself, and also the freedom beyond yourself—it's also true, as you're saying and as Martin Luther King would say, that my freedom is bound up in your freedom, that we can't separate them.

I think about a men's retreat I led here with Robert Hall, one of my beloved friends and dharma teachers. In the circle one night we were sharing stories, and there was a fellow on the retreat who had a radio show in Los Angeles on Sunday nights. It was a blues radio show—I don't know, maybe KPFK or one of those stations. He said he had a big following of people who were in prison. Lots of incarcerated people liked to listen to that show.

One day he got a letter from somebody who was serving a life sentence or a long term in prison, asking would he play some early blues masters like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Muddy Waters and Mississippi John Hurt—some of the classics. And the letter was signed John Huntsman, or whatever his name was.

A couple of Sundays later, the DJ said on air, "I received a letter from this gentleman, John Huntsman, who's obviously an aficionado of the blues and knows who the great masters are, and I'm pleased to be able to play these next songs for you."

Then a couple weeks later he got another letter from John Huntsman. It said he was so grateful for the show, and then this line: "That's the first time in my life I can remember hearing my name said with respect."

There's something in this—I've seen it in working with gang kids, and I know you know it at the bedside. It doesn't take forever. It takes a moment to see somebody with the eyes of love and with that vastness, to see the dignity and inviolable spirit that was born in them, to see something with that kind of respect, to really see the Buddha nature in each person. And that kind of intimacy can change everything, even in a moment.

There was a man who came to the hospice on compassionate release from prison. He had stabbed his sister seventeen times. He was in prison for manslaughter. I didn't tell our volunteers this. He came to stay with us. And he wouldn't let anybody help him. Just wouldn't.

But we just treated him with kindness.

One day we were in the backyard smoking cigarettes, and he said, "I let the girls help me today." The girls were the nurses. I said, "Well, what did you let them do?" "I let them get me in the shower." Not just put him in the shower—he actually got undressed in the shower with their help.

Gradually over time, just by treating him with kindness, just by holding up a mirror to his basic human goodness, he started to soften. Really soften.

And then he did a funny thing. I worked at Zen Hospice for twenty years. The only one who ever threw me a birthday party was this guy. He threw me a surprise party, and he saved his social security check. He actually wanted to get a stripper to jump out of a cake.

And?

The nurses persuaded him that just a regular cake would be okay.

But he did this all himself. He did it all himself. I walked into the room, and there he was with the volunteers, and he was so happy that he could give something.

Now this man, he'd been in institutions all his life.

He'd been in juvie, he'd been through prisons—he started out in orphanages. But he discovered in himself this basic human kindness that he couldn't show before in his life. Had he shown it, he might have been hurt or even killed. There was no room for this gentleness to be shown.

So this happens in the dying process. Whatever has been hidden in us oftentimes comes to the surface. Sometimes it's our ugliness that comes, but sometimes it's our beauty. In his case it was this beauty. But the thing is to keep seeing the whole human being that's there—even if, as Mother Teresa would say, he's in a distressing disguise. See the whole human being, no matter what they are.

These days we're talking about people with confusion, and a lot of our parents... The Alzheimer's epidemic is massive. We are totally unprepared. One in ten of us at sixty-five or over are going to have Alzheimer's. Thirty-two percent of us over eighty are going to have Alzheimer's. The numbers are growing fast. It's dwarfed the AIDS epidemic. But there's a whole human being there.

My Aunt Mimi had Alzheimer's, and I would go to see her, and she couldn't remember who I was. I'd known her all my life. She'd never been married, and I said, "Mimi, you never had a beau? You never had a sweetheart?" This is a woman who was calling me by different names, throwing her dress over her head. And when I asked if maybe she never had a sweetheart, she sat up in her chair like this, folded her arms, and said, "Some questions are too personal to ask."

I really got it. I really respected her, because there's a whole human being there. Even if they can't speak back to us in language we understand and we get confused—that's what happens for us. When we're around other people, we get confused. Other people are confused. But there's always a whole human being there, and we can always hold a mirror to that, to the wholeness in them.

If we're companioning someone who's sick or someone in our family who might be dying, that's the most important thing—just to hold a mirror up to them, to show them. And let their eyes, which are the clearest mirrors I've ever looked into, show you yourself. I've never looked into a mirror that's clearer than the eyes of someone who's dying. They've shown me all my holding and my resistance, all of it. And they also showed me something else—this kind of what I call undying love. That's there too.

But I don't have a fixed... I mean, I'm not romantic about dying. I'm not. It's the hardest work we will ever do. And it's beautiful, and it's horrible, and as Jack said, it's tragic, and it's transformative. But most of all, it's ordinary. It's normal. All of us will go through this. Nobody gets out alive.

We're in the soup together. We're in the boat together. When we really get it, we don't make dying something that happens later. Later gives us this comfortable distance from it. If we really see this is actually in the very nature of my being right now, then I think we're kinder to each other. We don't hold on so tightly to our ideas or notions of ourselves, or our beliefs. We let go. It engenders this kind of kindness and letting go, and an appreciation of one another.

When we know how precarious this life actually is, then we also understand how precious it is. And then we don't want to waste a moment. Then we want to jump in with both feet. Tell the people we love that we love them.

When you talk about Alzheimer's, I remember that story in our dear friend Rachel Remen's first book about a physician whose father had Alzheimer's severely enough that for at least five or six years the man was unable to speak at all. He gradually lost comprehension, and then he lost his language. There were caregivers, and the dad was there. And one morning he was sitting in his chair and he fell off—he was having a heart attack. His heart was in tremendous pain. Being a physician, the son could see that, and he was about to call 911. But the father lifted his head. He hadn't spoken for six years. And he said, "Don't call 911. It's a heart attack. I'm dying. Tell your mother I love her. And I love you." And that's it. And where those words came from—from someone who couldn't speak, whose brain was full of all the tangles of Alzheimer's—because we're not just this body. We are not.

It's interesting with Alzheimer's, because when people have a difficult time articulating their experience, we often think that there's nobody home. We're really identified with our brains. We're not so identified with our spleens. If our spleens don't work, it's okay. But if our brain doesn't work, then we think we're not there. It's just such a small story to live in. Such a small story. We are so much more than that.

And it becomes so clear and evident in the dying process. Ordinary people, regular people who had no spiritual practice in their life, regularly discover in themselves the resources, the compassion, the capacity to meet the impossible in extraordinary ways.

And this is really—I thank you for what you're saying—sort of winding up. It's both the gift of what you've written and of all your life work at Zen Hospice and so forth. And it's also the gift of the practice that we do together, that we share. Whether you use the word mindfulness or not, or use intimacy, as Zen Master Dogen said: to become enlightened is to become intimate with life.

So I want to read you a story in your honor as a way to close, unless there's something else you want to add before I do.

No, go ahead.

No, I mean, I was thinking of other things, but we could do this for days. At some point we have to go home.

A Sufi master known for his open-mindedness died in the fullness of time and found himself outside the gates of heaven. The attending angel said, "Go no further, O mortal, until you have proven your worthiness to enter this paradise." The master responded, "Just a minute. First, can you prove that this is really heaven and not just the wishful fantasy of my disordered mind undergoing death?" Before the angel could reply, a voice from inside the gate shouted, "Let him in—he's one of us."

Yeah, you do have something, okay.

Amongst some Zen monks, there's a tradition that on the day of your death you write a poem—a death poem—that tells maybe the essential truth of your life. And if you don't die that day, it doesn't count. You have to write a new one. But anyway, I was in the hospice one day reading this book of death poems, and there was with me a woman who had lived on the margins of society. She asked me about what I was reading, and I told her. She said, "I want to write one of those." I said, "Okay, good, you should do that." She said, "Well, what's the form?" I said, "Don't worry, just write it." This is a woman we would have passed by on the street.

Some hours later, she called me up to her room. She came upstairs. She said, "Frank, I've written my death poem. And when I die, I want you to pin it to my clothing, and I want to be cremated with it." I said, "Okay, we can do that." And she said, "But I want you to learn it by heart."

She didn't say memorize it. She said, I want you to learn it by heart. And she said, I want to know that it lives in your soul.

I feel so lucky I had these people in my life.

You want to hear her poem?

Don't just stand there with your hair turning gray.
Soon enough the seas will sink your little island.
So while there is still the illusion of time,
set out for some other shore.
No sense packing a bag.
You won't be able to lift it into your boat.
Give away all of your collections.
Take only new seeds and an old stick.
Send out some prayers on the wind before you sail.
Don't be afraid.
Someone knows you're coming.
An extra fish has been salted.

"Don't just stand there with your hair turning gray. Soon enough the seas will sink your little island. So while there is still the illusion of time"—that's a great line—"set out for some other shore." In other words, practice now.

"No sense packing a bag. You won't be able to lift it into your boat." Nobody I was with who was dying ever said, "I wish I'd gotten that second Mercedes."

She said, "Take only new seeds and an old stick." You know that image of farmers or gardeners putting a stick in the ground and then a seed, a stick in the ground and a seed? It means it's not a full stop.

Then she says, "Send out some prayers on the wind before you sail." Don't think you can do this by yourself. Get some help. But don't be afraid. In her view, someone knows you're coming. An extra fish has been salted.

That was her death poem. Her name was Sono, and thank you, Sono. I appreciate you honoring me with that poem. Thank you, my friend.

Well, let's just sit for a minute and let this rest in the heart.

Thank you again for coming. Please feel free to come back, walk the land, do a retreat—anything that nourishes your spirit, quiets your mind, tends your heart. You are now part of this community just by virtue of being here.

And tend each day with love.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 10

Energy to Awaken

Jack Kornfield · 1h01

> *In this talk delivered near the summer solstice and on Juneteenth, Jack Kornfield continues his series on Buddha nature and the pāramitās by exploring the quality of wise effort or wise endeavor (sammā vāyāma). He begins by inviting listeners into contemplative presence, noting how we orbit through the vastness of space while often lost in our to-do lists, and honoring the ongoing work of liberation commemorated by Juneteenth.*
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> *Kornfield presents wise effort through several dimensions: the effort to be mindful and present with loving awareness; the effort to prevent unwholesome states from arising and to release them when they do; the cultivation and sustaining of wholesome states like love, generosity, and wisdom; and the balance required in spiritual practice—neither too tight nor too loose, like tuning a lute. He draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Suzuki Roshi, and Alan Watts, illustrating how attention can be directed and trained, and how we can choose which mental states to "pick up" and which to leave aside.*
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> *The talk weaves personal stories—from watching Venus transit the sun to encountering a fawn on the Spirit Rock land—with practical guidance on navigating compulsion, addiction, and suffering through self-compassion. Kornfield emphasizes that inner development must match outer development, that our freedom is interconnected with the freedom of all beings, and that we are called to tend both the garden of our hearts and the garden of the world, planting seeds of love wherever we are.*

God bless you.

Please let yourself get settled as we begin. Listening to teachings is its own kind of meditation or contemplation. You sit, you listen, and part of the response is not so much to take notes—there's no quiz or grade at the end—but more to listen and see if something resonates as true in your own understanding and experience. It's really a reminder of something that you already know. And if something doesn't seem useful, then simply let it go.

People come to a temple or a meditation center or a sacred place—although in a truer sense every place is sacred—but to the places we create for this purpose: to quiet the mind and listen to or tend the heart, to find some kind of balance or inner peace, or release conflict and stress that we might be carrying, or find some sense of renewal or compassion.

Today seems like a very good day for teachings. First of all, it's just a day or so before the summer solstice, and there's this beautiful glow of light still after eight o'clock, the hillsides illuminated.

A couple of years ago I went to the top of Mount Tamalpais during an afternoon to watch the transit of the planet Venus across the face of the Sun. There were a number of people up there who had big telescopes. One man had a large telescope you could peer into, with all the appropriate filters to make it safe. You look in and there's this enormous glowing orange-yellow disc of the Sun, and it's very lively when you look at it through a big telescope—this glowing fiery thing, quite fantastic. And then for an hour or so, progressing across the face of the Sun was this little black marble, basically, which was the planet Venus. We were seeing the backside, the shadow side of it, as it slowly moved across.

In looking, I could feel not just the planet Venus but somehow ourselves in space, because we're on another one of those little marbles going around in our solar system, this huge, vast, erupting luminous ball of sunlight. And here we are, doing our dance around the sun. For me, it's just about seventy-two years now—seventy-two turns around. It gave a sense of vastness and perspective and mystery. How did this all happen? Usually we're kind of checking off our to-do list, what we have to do tomorrow. But meanwhile, we're on this great ride around the sun, and also in the spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy—that's a little bit longer, 250 million years or so.

There's something so beautiful about just taking a pause and noticing the turning of the seasons and the changing of the light and having some sense of that which is outside of time.

Aldous Huxley wrote that an idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity. Future time, in the idea of endless progress, is the devil's work, demanding human sacrifice on an enormous scale. He's really talking about what it means if we're always living in the doing mode rather than having a sense that we're living in eternity as well—that we live in the reality of the present with a greater sense of mystery and appreciation.

So it's a beautiful time to come to the temple and find some balance. The outer world is now coming to balance of light, and in its way, all the light, then turning toward the equinox, the true balance, and then back to the winter solstice. And we get to be part of this cycling dance.

Today is also Juneteenth. For those who don't know or remember, it is a celebration on June 19th of the last emancipation of slaves in the United States. That happened in Texas about two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Some of the states that weren't in the Confederacy still had slaves after Lincoln, in theory, freed slaves in other parts of the continental United States. The last proclamation for the freeing of slaves in this country came in Galveston, Texas, when General Gordon Granger announced on June 19th—there were 250,000 slaves in Texas, a quarter of a million people enslaved, just so we don't forget the reality of this—and on that day, in Galveston, he said all who are here are now emancipated and equal as human beings under the law and in our community.

This is celebrated in different parts of the country, and it too is worthy of acknowledging as we come together. Because we also come together seeking in ourselves a kind of freedom. But in fact, as Martin Luther King and others have said, we can't be truly free unless everyone is free. Somehow our freedom is tied up with everyone else's.

What's also true is that the vestiges of slavery persist. In my experience having done some work in our enormous prison system—where we have two and a half to three million people incarcerated and eight million people in the prison industrial system—this is in part a vestige of slavery. Our prisons are in some ways giant poverty and racist poverty prisons. So it's not over, really. May all those who are enslaved be freed, in all kinds of ways.

We come here in the midst of the turning of the seasons, for whatever our personal motivation is—to quiet the mind and the heart, to find some inner freedom. And as Martin Luther King said, the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice.

May it be so.

We go through some very hard times in different ways—politically, economically. But somehow also the goodwill of humanity may bend us in the long run toward greater justice, outwardly and inwardly.

This year, in these monthly Monday night teachings, I'm doing a series of talks on what's called the Buddha nature, or sometimes the paramitas—the innate perfections in human beings and our capacity to manifest and live from our Buddha nature. In the course of previous months, we've talked about generosity, integrity, wisdom, renunciation, these qualities. Each invites a shift of identity from a small sense of self, a sense

of separateness—sometimes it's called the body of fear—to open and live from a greater possibility: greater generosity, greater wisdom, greater integrity, greater connection with all things.

And it's both individual, but we can't separate the individual from our interdependence with everyone else and everything else. Here you are paying attention to your breath, the breath that was breathed by other people in the room and by the deer and the raccoon—and I once saw a badger here near the stream. Badger breath. Sounds like a bad ad on television, actually. But it's the same breath that dusted the tops of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came over the Pacific, and it also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. We're all in it together.

And so we also recognize, as I say so often, that the outer developments we have so remarkably surrounded ourselves with—electronics, our smartphones, the internet, computer technology, biotechnology, space technology, nanotechnology—no amount of that will save us from continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing environmental destruction, continuing tribalism, and continuing addiction in our society. It has become, if I read the statistic right, the number one cause of death for adults between ages twenty and fifty: drug overdose. So something is happening that needs tending.

What this tells us is that the inner world of humanity now needs to be developed to match the outer world. We can't rely on outer development to save us in some fundamental way, or to live with love and wisdom in a beneficial way, without also cultivating the inner. And that becomes both a personal endeavor, but it also in some way becomes our collective task.

So tonight, the next step in these teachings on Buddha nature is traditionally called right effort, maybe right endeavor. I try to figure out how to translate this in a way that's meaningful to us in our own lives. We have an innate amount of energy. We have an innate life force. And the question is: How will we use it? How do we direct it?

There are stories—all these ancient stories with these paramitas or teachings. The main story connected with this particular quality of energy and effort is the story of a great ox who could do anything. In agricultural times in India, oxen were considered the most powerful animal that you could tame to do things with. What do you do with the ox of your own life, and its energy?

So, just a little task as we sit here. You don't have to move or anything, but I'd like you to put your attention—as you're listening to me now—shift your attention to the doors on the left that lead outside. You don't even have to turn your head, just sort of your eyes and your attention. Put your attention over that side of the room. Now put

your attention back up here. And now, even without looking, put your attention up above, like the space above your body. Now put your attention in your feet. Now put your attention in your hands. Now bring your attention to your heart, to your chest. Notice both the physical sensations and perhaps any feelings that are present.

So what's true is that you can direct your attention. You can put it all over—in your body, outside your body, to physical sensations, to the emotions that are present. We were doing it in our meditation practice as we sat here. And so the question of right effort really is: Where and how will you direct your attention and your energy? What is right effort?

There are several dimensions of it. And as you listen, perhaps something will serve as a reminder for you in your life.

The first dimension of right effort—and I think I'd like to translate it as wise effort—particularly in spiritual life, but it turns out actually in all of life, is simply the effort to be mindful, to be present with loving awareness. From Alan Watts: "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor fearful clinging to the past or anticipation of the future, and consists of being sensitive to each moment, regarding it as utterly new and unique, and having the mind and the heart open and wholly receptive."

So the first and most central training and capacity that we have is actually to be present. I remember teaching with Houston Smith, this wonderful old professor of religion who had been at MIT and wrote that book on world religions that sold millions of copies. He was really elegant—one of the great gentlemen that I ever met.

We were doing a panel at UCLA or some similar grand event, in a great big auditorium. Houston was already in his nineties. He had these enormous hearing aids. And he stood up, a little bit shaky at ninety-two or ninety-three, and said, "Well, I can't see you that well, and I certainly can't hear. My body's a little shaky. But I'm here." And everybody applauded—okay, way to go, Houston!

There was something so touching in that moment. All right, his body may not have been able in the way it once was, or in the way one might wish for, but the disability was not the question. "I'm here," he said, "and I'm really here with you." There was this beautiful sense of what it meant to show up for life however it was.

Suzuki Roshi invited a few great up-and-coming Zen masters from Japan to help him—Katagiri Roshi and Kobun Chino Roshi. They were senseis in those days. Katagiri came but didn't speak English very well. Suzuki Roshi kept saying, "You need to take the

dharma seat and give some teachings. You can't just come here." Katagiri protested, "But I can't speak English very well." Suzuki Roshi replied, "It doesn't take a lot of English to teach the dharma. Here, I'll show you."

So they rang the bell and Suzuki Roshi went in, bowed, and took his seat. Everyone gathered for the dharma teachings. He looked out and said, "Today is today. Today is not yesterday. Today is not tomorrow. Today is today." Then he bowed, got down, and said to Katagiri, "Okay, six words, right? There's a dharma teaching for you."

This was really his amplification of that famous teaching: the goal of meditation practice is to keep your beginner's mind. To actually come alive and see with the eyes of children playing on the floor in your room, to watch the fading of the light as you walk in the fields or along the road, to see the people you work with, to tend your garden, to taste the food you eat—to actually be alive where you are and see what's happening around you.

So this is the game, really. The first and most central capacity of your Buddha nature is that it's possible to live in an awake way and not be lost, as much as we usually are, in plans and memories. Plans are useful. Remembering has its place. But we've got it reversed—we live mostly there and not here. The invitation is to live in the reality of the present.

And the gift is that attention can be directed, as you just experienced. It can be steadied. It can be trained. In doing so, there comes an intimacy with life, with the people you're with, with the work you're doing, with the things you care about, with the wondrous nowness of experience.

There also comes a kind of authenticity. When we live in our past and future so much, we're not really connected with ourselves, or with others. But when we become more present, we know more clearly what we feel, what we sense. We find ourselves in a deeper relationship with life instead of living so many moments ahead. We see the colors, taste the textures and flavors of life in all their richness.

You walk out here on the land and smell the bay leaves from all these bay trees. I've walked this land enough to have seen a number of bobcats. One of my favorite memories involves the little path that goes up to a cottage in back. I was walking up to this cottage one day in spring—April or May—after the little fawns were born. I've seen lots of fawns around here. I walked up just a little ways, paying attention. Then all of a sudden, in relatively low grass, right at the edge of the path, there was the body of a little spotted fawn, all curled in on itself.

I thought, well, maybe it died. So I stood very, very still. I couldn't see it breathe. I wondered if it was still alive. Okay, I'll just meditate.

I'll just stay here. And then, all of a sudden, one dark eye opened like that and shut very quickly—like it had seen some monster. Okay, it's in there. So very slowly I crept away and went some considerable distance. I spent about five or ten minutes there, and then I went back to see. Of course, its mom had come and it was gone and it was fine. But it was a beautiful moment. It was like we were there in this stillness between life and birth and death. Okay, I'm here. Oh, whoops, all right, I'll leave you alone.

There's something about being willing to quiet ourselves with one another, with the things that we have to do, with the tending of the world as a whole, that is part of the invitation of mindfulness or loving awareness. It's a different way of being than just being on a kind of inner treadmill. Does it make sense to you? This is why people say, "Okay, I sat." And even though sometimes meditation is pleasant and sometimes it's distracted or not so pleasant, there's something about just quieting ourselves or coming back into center, into presence, that's empowering, that gives us a connection with life.

So that's the first meaning of wise effort—to train your capacity to be present, to develop it, to sense it, and to embody it.

Now the second dimension. In Pali or Sanskrit, the word for mindfulness is *sati*, but it's sometimes a compound word: *sati sampajañña*. The second part of the word is sometimes translated as "clear comprehension." I think a more useful translation is "the mindful response." Mindfulness has two different dimensions to it. One is to see what's so—to be connected with the present with clarity and kindness, loving awareness. And the second is the mindful response. What do we do?

In that case with the fawn, I stayed still, then I saw its eye, then I backed away. How do we respond mindfully to the circumstances of our life?

In the traditional descriptions of wise effort, there are four dimensions. One is to prevent unhealthy states—greed, hatred, ignorance, the causes of suffering in our life and others—to do what you can to prevent them from arising in yourself. Pay attention to your life so you see with clarity what it is that brings those states to be, and try to prevent them in whatever way, to live in a way that diminishes greed, hatred, fear, ignorance, confusion. Prevent them.

The second is this: if they do arise—which they will, because we're human beings—when you notice them arising, release them. Let them go. Do not follow them. Just as you can direct your attention to your feet or your hands or the door or your heart, you can direct your energy to either follow certain things or not follow them. We all know

this. This becomes part of the inner art that gives you a sense of how to navigate. Instead of the boat without a rudder, it gives you a rudder to steer with in the waters of the stream you're navigating. To release that which is unhealthy.

The next two of these four wise efforts concern doing that which fosters love, that fosters awareness or attention, that fosters wisdom, that fosters generosity—inwardly and in the circumstances of your life. Do those things that foster your well-being and the well-being of others. This points to the inner states, but also to how we act.

And then the fourth: when wholesome states do arise, when you have a sense of love and connection and generosity and well-being, do that which sustains them. Dwell in them. Inhabit them. Invite them in some way to become more the way that you move through the world.

This is possible for us. My teacher Ajahn Chah used to say it's a little bit like being at a mango tree when the season is ripe. You go to the mango tree, maybe even shake the tree, and some mangoes come down. Then you sort through: Is this an old rotten mango, or is this a fresh good mango? It's not that complicated. You take a look at which mango is good. Those go in your basket. These ones, leave aside. To have that capacity of attention to see: this is healthy, this is skillful, this brings benefit. And this one—this is not one I want to pick up.

One of our great philosophers, along with all kinds of other dimensions, was Albert Einstein. He said, "I think the most important question facing humanity is: Is the universe a friendly place? For if we decide that the universe is an unfriendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries, and our natural resources to achieve safety and power by creating bigger walls to keep out the unfriendliness and bigger weapons to destroy all that which is unfriendly. But if we decide that the universe is a friendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries, and our natural resources to create tools and models of understanding. And because power and safety come together with understanding, we will understand the workings and motives of the universe, and it will be a benefit to all."

Here's Einstein offering us, in a way, a wise way to approach the world—whether it's out of fear, building weapons and building walls, or seeing the possibility of benevolence, seeing the possibility that we can do something beautiful with our human incarnation and our human life.

Whether it's your meditative or spiritual practice, your personal relationships and family, your community, or the globe—how do you direct your life energy? Direct it toward that which is wholesome or healthy. This isn't about judgment, saying you're good or bad. It's just knowing that we contain all these energies. And the first thing, of course, is to recognize it. Okay, here's one I get caught in.

Anger or fear or addiction or anxiety or compulsion—whatever arises in ways that don't feel healthy. Maybe with attention, I don't have to follow that.

I was out walking with Ajahn Chah on alms round, my teacher in the forest monasteries of Thailand. We passed a field, and there was a great big rock, a boulder in the middle of it. He said to us who were with him, "Do you see that boulder over there?" We said yes. He said, "Is it heavy?" We said yes. And he smiled. "Not if you don't pick it up."

That's the game, you know. You're going to see this stuff in your experience, but you don't actually have to pick it up. And if it arises, you can release it.

Here's a story from my book *No Time Like the Present*. Sandra, a woman I worked with during one of the retreats here, needed a great deal of compassion to face her lifelong demon of binge eating. She described years of struggling with the compulsion and of wandering—she called it wandering like a hungry ghost—with so much self-hatred.

"I believed that food had an unparalleled capacity to bring satisfaction and free me from suffering. Time and again I reached for the food, looking for it to do its magic, only to have it turn on me, to fail me, to bring me untold physical and emotional suffering and shame. I became hypercritical of myself and my situation and then despaired.

"Freedom has come as I've become more mindful of my body and the intense discomfort I was trying to escape from. I started to find that I could recover more quickly and less painfully from bouts of compulsive binging if I could stay even a little bit kind to my body and present with my pain."

This is what loving awareness trains us for—to open our capacity to be present for the measure of pain and sorrow and beauty that we all have.

"If I could stay even a little bit kind to my body and present with my pain, instead of eating even more just to try and avoid the effects of having eaten too much and the remorse of having done it again, I could actually watch myself start down that sad old path. And as the loving awareness grew, I realized, oh, I don't have to do this. And self-compassion would grow. I'm deeply grateful for the compassion that has rescued me from the realm of the hungry ghosts."

There's something very tender in listening to that, because you can feel her suffering and also the wisdom in it—that this is what's possible for us in each of our own lives and in our own dimensions.

We can let things go.

I think about a story Sylvia Boorstein told. She and Seymour had a little house in southern France where she would go for quite a long time. They decided they needed to change the bed they had, needed a new bed. So they went to the local town and saw this beautiful antique bed, but it had to be fixed in some special way and the mattress refitted. They arranged to buy it. First of all, it didn't come on time. Then when it finally came, the mattress didn't fit right, and the woman charged them considerably more to fix it and make it right.

Sylvia said, "I started to get really upset and angry with her because she wasn't doing what she said and was charging more. But I didn't know what to do with it, so I decided I would go and tell her how I felt." She went in to see Madame Verdon and thanked her for the beautiful bed, but said she was upset because of the way it had gone—charging extra money, not doing it right, not doing what she'd promised. "It caused the arising of *mauvaise émotion*," she explained, "of bad feelings."

Madame Verdon's response was to look at her and say, "Oh, these *mauvaise émotions*—they are not good for you. You should let them go."

Nothing about the money, mind you. "They're bad for you. You should let them go."

Here's a poem from an eight-year-old: "I want to tell the fish, eat only the bait, not the hook. When you eat the bait, start from the edge and slowly gnaw bit by bit. Never, ever gobble it in one go."

There's your meditation instructions.

You can pay attention and reflect in yourself: What fosters well-being for you?

What fosters love for you? What fosters a sense of well-being? What fosters generosity? What fosters some centeredness and calm? Is it sitting in meditation? Or walking in nature? Maybe it's some kinds of reading that you do, or community. Maybe it's hanging out with children. Maybe it's avoiding children—I don't know. Maybe it's quieting yourself. Or maybe it's taking action about things that you care about, so that you actually don't foster well-being until you stand up for something that matters. That may be what

brings this kind of energy of life and presence alive for you and brings a greater clarity. But these kinds of reflections in yourself—what turns you toward well-being and health—are part of these teachings.

So wise effort, wise endeavor: the effort to be mindful, to bring loving awareness to this world. The effort, as you do, to not only notice what's here—mindfulness—but also to respond to it in a way that fosters that which is healthy, and to let go of that which isn't, personally and in your relation to others.

Two more dimensions. Wise effort asks for a kind of steadiness or willingness. And if you want to integrate your meditation or your spiritual ideas and perspective into your life, it's not that easy—because we have gain and loss and praise and blame, and painful days and pleasant experiences. It goes back and forth, joy and sorrow. Everybody has this, right? So you say, all right, I want my life to be this beautiful, happy thing. It doesn't work that way. That's not human incarnation. Human incarnation has ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows.

So what's asked of you in this dimension of wise endeavor or wise effort is to say, yes, this is the place I will practice. To be willing to turn toward your experience, whatever it is, and say, this is the place of practice.

Frank O'Connor, the Irish author, tells in one of his books how, as a boy, he and his friends would make their way adventuring across the Irish countryside. When they came to an orchard wall that seemed too high and too doubtful to climb over, too difficult to permit their voyage to continue, they would take off their hats and toss them over the wall. And then they had no choice but to follow them.

There's something in that spirit of adventure—to say, all right, things are this way, sometimes very painful, sometimes beautiful. Let's see what comes next. Let's open ourselves. Let's see how we can work with this, how we can respond to what's here. Because you don't actually know where you are. Even looking at that little marbled black, beautiful round black, perfect circle move across the face of the sun—we don't really know where we are. We're somehow in the midst of the universe unfolding.

Zen Master Dogen said to meditate is like being on a boat on the ocean, where you can't actually see the shore. What you have is where you are. This is where we are.

And so you come into the present and you notice what's skillful and healthy and foster that, and what's unhealthy you let go. But you stay steady with it and you say, all right, let's see then what happens. You experiment, you explore—let's see what happens next.

With this, you start to understand that mindfulness or loving awareness—and it's in the very first teachings in the Buddhist texts on mindfulness—is developed inwardly and it's developed outwardly. And then finally it's developed inwardly and outwardly together, so that the two really can't be separated. You attend to your own inner freedom and you attend to the freedom of others. You attend to your own well-being and you tend to the well-being of others.

I was recently at a conference with Elissa Epel. She works as a scientist in a lab with Liz Blackburn at UC here in the city. Elizabeth Blackburn won the Nobel Prize for her discovery of telomeres, the little caps on the end of chromosomes that protect chromosomes—and when they get frayed or reduced, they reduce your life expectancy and so forth.

And Elissa has done some fascinating research. One of the most striking findings was a study showing that for people who had meditated for some weeks—not a huge long time—the frayed telomeres actually got better, extending themselves. So you're going to live longer, right? There is that benefit if you practice, though I know that doesn't matter to you.

But here's what was more remarkable, and I really want to read the full analysis of the study. They began to discover that the telomeres were affected not just by what you did for yourself, but by the community and place around you.

And here's the truly wild part. If you were in a community where there is a great deal of disparity between rich and poor, the people who are poor—who generally have a lot of stress, wondering how they'll pay the bills, how they'll feed their kids—their telomeres were shorter and frayed. Stress, pretty straightforward. But the people who lived in that same community, even in a gated community separated from those in poverty, their telomeres were also frayed and shorter.

It's as if your cells are listening and connected to one another. Isn't that interesting? We know interdependence, but now, with sophisticated science, we're seeing new levels of it.

So steadiness, or willingness, means saying: all right, I'm going to tend inward and outward and make this life that I have—whatever comes with it—a place where I bring attention and loving awareness, a place where I cultivate that which is beneficial. Rather than just measuring success and failure, whatever comes becomes a place for practice.

And it can be tough.

Since today is Juneteenth, I thought I would read something fitting in honor of it. I found this children's book while looking through a bookstore. It's called *Extraordinary People*. I thought it was funny because the central person in the middle of the picture is Evel Knievel, the daredevil. Next to him is Marie Curie, and on the other side is Bruce Lee. I said, okay, this is a pretty interesting book. When I started to flip through, I found a whole bunch of people I'd never heard of, or maybe just vaguely heard of.

The one I want to read represents this quality of steadiness, of willingness to tend both inner and outer. Her nickname was Stagecoach Mary.

Born in Hickman County, Tennessee. Died in Montana in 1914. Stagecoach Mary—six foot tall, 200 pounds. Mary smoked cigars, packed a pistol, kept a jug of whiskey at her side, and made certain the mail got delivered. She was the first African American woman to be employed as a mail carrier in the United States, and only the second woman to work for the US Postal Service—a job she took on at age sixty.

She was born a slave, grew up as an orphan, and after emancipation, she was taken under the wing of an Ohio nun named Mother Amadeus. When Mother Amadeus suddenly got sick, Mary nursed her back to health. She also took it upon herself to protect all the nuns in the convent with a gun strapped under her apron. Of course, this sort of toughness, while it may have been appreciated, doesn't necessarily fit in a nunnery in the long term, and ultimately she was dismissed from her duties.

But the nuns felt bad, so they provided her with enough money to start her own business. Mary opened a café, but because she was kind and generous, she gave food to everyone who stepped in, and her business didn't do very well—ran into the ground several times. Eventually she closed down the café and began working a mail delivery job. She and her mule, Moses, never missed a day of work for a decade. Even if it was snowing and the wagon was frozen in its tracks, Mary would make the deliveries on foot, carrying the sacks of mail on her shoulders.

Cascade, Montana loves Stagecoach Mary, and every year on her birthday, the town closes its schools to celebrate.

So there's a little bit of right effort, of willingness. But we have it in us. You each do, in your own way. And what's possible is to remember that you carry this capacity to direct your attention and to direct your energy. And it's not like some little battery that's going to run out. Love doesn't run out. When you open the channel, you get more love. Attention doesn't run out. When you bring more attention, attention grows. You become a channel for something that's already a part of you.

Steadiness and willingness to be here for the ten thousand joys and sorrows.

And then the last dimension is balance.

The traditional metaphor, which most everyone has heard in the Buddhist texts, comes from the Buddha himself: in your spiritual practice, in your meditation, in your meditative life, wise energy and wise effort is like tuning the strings of a lute or guitar. You don't want it too tight and you don't want it too loose. You want to tune it in a way that brings harmony.

This is something we need to learn, and we experiment with it—like riding a bicycle in some way. And again, my teacher Ajahn Chah would sometimes teach in what seemed like contradictory ways, telling one person to do this, then telling somebody else to do something entirely different.

When I asked him about it, I said, "Wait, you contradict yourself." He just laughed. He said, "This is how I teach." He said, "There's a beautiful road to go down, and I know it well. But I look down and I see that somebody's walking and they're about to fall in the ditch on the right-hand side, or get lost in some little sidetrack. So I say, 'Hey, go to the left a little bit.' And then you see that same person, or another, about to fall in a ditch on the left-hand side, or get off on a little sidetrack. And I say, 'Hey, now go to the right a little bit.'" And he said, "That's really all I do—I try to bring them back to where they are and not get lost."

This takes a kind of attentiveness to our lives, to see with loving awareness what is the right way to marshal our energy and to use it wisely. What is a mindful response? And of course, as Martha Graham says, you are unique in the whole vast universe. There has never been—in galaxies and hundreds of millions of galaxies—there's never been anybody as weird as you. This is it. So either you're going to do it or not, but this is what you've got. You might as well flaunt it, because this is your life.

Sometimes what's needed in balance is to be tough. In education, you know, there are these different fads. Grit is fashionable now, right? Teaching children grit, among other things. There's a lot children can learn from being tough.

It used to be that in the Zen tradition, if you wanted to practice in a Zen temple in Japan, you had to go and sit tangaryo first. They didn't let you just knock on the door and say, "I want to come and do a retreat," like Spirit Rock where you just sign up online and pay your money. No. You had to go and sit outside the gate and show that you were sincere. And to show that you were sincere meant often you would go in the winter and sit in the snow, sit outside the gate all day and not move. Somebody would kind of open the gate a little and say, "We got one sitting out there, let's see how long they last." And

after two or three or four days of sitting in the snow and not moving, you come back the next morning—"Okay, I'm ready"—and go through it again. They'd say, "I think we got a live one. All right, open the gate, we'll let him in and see if they're any good."

There's something in the training, and you all know it, that asks a kind of strength and courage in you. There are times in life when this will be demanded of you. Sometimes it's some great endeavor that you really have to throw yourself into—you started an enterprise, or a school, or a business, or a family. "Okay, we have twins." Ha! Now you don't have to go sit in front of the gate of the Zen temple. You have two live-in Zen masters. You just gave birth. All right, that's your training.

But also I think of the times when people have come up to me and said, "My child has a very serious cancer," or "My child has died." And then, all right, what do you do with that as a spiritual practice? Because it's one of the great sufferings, one of the greatest sufferings to be visited upon us, to lose a beloved child. And yet you have to go on living. You carry it. You can't say, "I'll get over it." You don't get over it. You take it and it cracks your heart and it changes you as a person. And then you have to live with that fire. It becomes part of who you are. And maybe the spirit of that child says, "All right, dad or mom, now you really have to live, because I'm not here to live it. You've got to live my part too."

So there's a toughness that's asked of us. You will have it come upon you, and at times that is what's needed.

But sometimes what we need in order to really be present for this mysterious life is much more delicate. We need to stop and pause and listen more deeply, slow down.

This is a poem about approaching things in a more tender way:

Think of those Chinese monks' tales, years of struggling in the zendo and then the clink while sweeping up of one stone on another and enlightenment like that.

Emily Dickinson's wisdom: truth in circuit lies, in circles. Or see Grant's book, *Common Birds and How to Know Them*, New York, Scribner's, 1901. And here's the instruction: "The approach must be by detour. Advantage taken of rock, tree, mound, and brush. But if without success this way, use artifice. Throw off all stealth appearance, watchfulness. Look guileless, a loiterer, purposeless. Stroll on, not looking directly toward the bird, avoiding any gaze too steadfast. Or failing still in this, give voice to sundry whistles and chirps—your quarry may stay to answer."

More briefly: try, but stymied, give it up. Do something else. Leave the untrappable thought. Go walking. Ideas buzz the air like flies. Return to work. And when you get quiet, outside the window the cream-dipped tail and red fire legs, doused with watery brown, emerges from the wood's dark margin, stopping all your thoughts—and briefly squats. Not fox, but vixen. And then moves along, out of sight.

Enlightenment, wrote one master, is an accident, though certain efforts make you accident-prone. Take your time.

And so there's something also about delicacy—in your own life and in your attending of one another. No one can tell you, any more than with riding a bicycle, how to come back to balance. This is another part of loving awareness: to listen in this way.

Laurie Anderson—poet, performance artist, musician—writes:

"In the Tibetan map of the world, the world is a circle. And at the center there's an enormous mountain guarded by four gates. And when they draw a map of the world, they draw the map in sand. And it takes months. And then when the map is finished, they say some prayers and erase it and throw the sand into the nearest river.

Last fall, the Dalai Lama came to New York City to do a two-week ceremony called the Kalachakra, which is a prayer to heal the earth. And woven into these prayers were a series of vows that he asked us to take. And before I knew it, I'd taken a vow to be kind for the rest of my life. And I walked out of there and I thought, for the rest of my life? What have I done? This is a disaster.

And I was really worried. Had I promised too much? Not enough? I was really in a panic. They had come from Tibet for the ceremony and they were walking around Midtown in their new brown shoes, and I went up to one of the monks and said, can you come with me to have a cappuccino right now and talk?

And so we went to this little Italian place. He'd never had coffee before, so he kept talking faster and faster. And I kept saying, look, I don't know whether I promised too much or too little—can you help me please?

And he was really being practical. He said, look, don't limit yourself. Don't be so strict. Open it up. He said, the mind is a wild white horse. And when you make a corral for it, make sure it's not too small. And another thing: when your house burns down, just walk away. And another thing: keep your eyes open. And one more thing: keep going."

Because it's time to go home.

So here we are. We don't quite know where we are on the boat in the ocean, and we're on this little marble going around our beautiful star. But we do know some things. In Zen they say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. You quiet the mind and tend the heart, and then you get up.

And the garden is the garden of your life, the garden of the world. You plant seeds wherever you are, in whatever your situation. You plant seeds of love, of compassion, of care for yourself and others. You stretch your arm out and mend the part of the world that you can touch. Because you can't mend the whole world, but you can mend some part of it.

There's a beautiful account of Alan Chadwick at the University of Santa Cruz, who was one of the pioneers of biodynamic gardening and all kinds of amazing things. Chadwick took his class in the 1970s looking for a place to do a garden, and went and found a junkyard lot filled with rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. And the owner said, sure, but you're crazy—that soil is dead.

And so the students put months into revitalizing the soil. This garden has now become famous for its extraordinary delicious vegetables and gorgeous flowers. And in the same way, you can both tend the garden of your heart and of your life, and you can plant beautiful seeds. That's what's given to you.

This is really the gift of wise endeavor, wise effort. To step out of the body of fear, the small sense of self—those fearful thoughts will come—and rest in something bigger, in the sense of your connection with the vastness and with the people you meet and the work you do. Whether it's a business you're starting, whether it's the raising of a child, whether it's a spiritual endeavor, whether it's an artistic endeavor—what moves through the stars moves through you. This is what's given to you. And the qualities of the Buddha can awaken in you.

As it says: one hand on the beauty of the world and one hand on the suffering of all beings, two feet grounded in the present moment. And then as you walk through the world, plant those seeds that bring beauty where you are, inwardly and outwardly.

You've been given the energy of the stars, this life energy, and you have the capacity to do all kinds of things with it. May you use this energy to plant beautiful seeds, to work for justice, to plant seeds of love, to care for yourself and those around you and

this earth, each in your own way. And may you use your meditation, your spiritual practices, as a way to cultivate and remind you and open your heart and your being to this possibility.

Now in Texas on Juneteenth they have a lot of parties. So feel free—even in California we can celebrate emancipation. Thank you so much for coming. Enjoy this beautiful almost-summer-solstice evening. And see you again, perhaps. Good night.

CHAPTER 11

Monday Night Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 35 min

> *In this welcoming Monday night sitting at Spirit Rock Center, Jack Kornfield offers an accessible introduction to meditation practice rooted in mindfulness and loving awareness. He guides practitioners through a 30-35 minute sitting, beginning with establishing a dignified yet relaxed posture and bringing attention to the present moment experience of body, mind, and heart.*
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> *The meditation instruction focuses on using the breath as an anchor—feeling it at the nostrils, throat, chest, or belly—while allowing thoughts, emotions, and sensations to rise and fall like waves around this central point of awareness. Kornfield teaches the traditional practice of mental noting: when a strong experience captures attention away from the breath, one turns to welcome it with a gentle label such as "planning," "remembering," "sadness," or "excitement," feeling how it moves through body and mind before returning to the breath.*
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> *Throughout the guidance, Kornfield emphasizes receiving all experience with compassion and kindness, describing this quality as "loving awareness." He offers the image of training attention like training a puppy—with patience and gentleness rather than harshness. This talk exemplifies Spirit Rock's commitment to making the Dharma accessible to all, regardless of background or experience level, while honoring the twin principles of compassion and inner freedom that form the essence of Buddhist spiritual teachings.*

Good evening.

It's a pleasure to welcome you here to this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock Center. If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield.

How many of you are here at Spirit Rock for the first time? Oh, wonderful. Welcome. And if you happen to see a hand go up next to you or near you and you've been here for a while, at the break, just introduce yourself. Say hello to that person or welcome them here. Thank you.

Monday Night Sitting Group has been ongoing now for thirty-two, thirty-three years. Spirit Rock has grown over the course of this time in this beautiful valley that we received from the Nature Conservancy, through the care of a whole community commit-

ted to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—which are the essence of Buddhist spiritual teachings, but really are part of all wise spiritual life.

We have all kinds of classes and retreats and programs: for educators, for healthcare professionals, family program teachings for parenting as a spiritual practice, informed citizenship as a spiritual practice, and retreats of three days, a week, a month. Whatever brings you here, it's really a pleasure to welcome you. We open our gates to everyone—whatever your orientation, your sexual orientation, whatever your class or color or race or background. The Dharma gates open and say: you are welcome here.

Monday night has served as a gateway, an introduction for many people to Spirit Rock Center and to the teachings we have here. What we do on Mondays is really pretty simple. We sit for thirty to thirty-five minutes in meditation with a little bit of guidance and a lot of silence. Then after the sitting, we take a break of ten to fifteen minutes to stretch or relax, usually followed by a talk, as it will be this evening—some teaching, sometimes dialogue or questions and answers.

I've been teaching one Monday a month at this point. Not quite retired, but taking time to do some other things and not doing it weekly as I had for such a long time. So when I get to come back on Mondays and be with everybody, it's actually kind of fun and wonderful. I'm glad to see you.

Whatever brought you here, again, welcome. The invitation is to find your own way to quiet the mind, tend the heart, and listen in some deep way.

Let us begin with a period of meditation.

Let yourself find a way to sit that's both comfortable and alert. If you're in a chair, you might let your feet be flat on the floor, sitting upright so there's some sense of dignity and presence, but also a graciousness and ease. If you're on a cushion on the floor or a bench, find a way to sit where your body is stable and comfortable.

When you feel present in this way—comfortable and stable—allow your eyes to close gently for this time. First, bring your attention to the quality of presence with your own body, mind, and heart. Notice: here you are, alive, sitting halfway between heaven and earth in this human form, taking your seat. There will be the state of your body, the moods and feelings that are present, the thoughts that come through. Notice that you can begin to be aware of just what is here and now.

Let this sense of awareness—of mindful awareness or loving awareness, we'll call it—attend to your experience as you begin to sit.

What you often notice as you start to pay attention is that the mind is easily distracted. After a few seconds or a little bit of time being present, the attention goes off into thinking or planning or remembering, or goes to other sounds and sensations. So to help deepen the quality of presence underneath the waves of thoughts and plans and memories, become aware of the wave of the breath, how the body is breathing itself.

Feel the breath as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, coolness at the upper lip—or the rise and fall of chest or belly, or the whole body breathing. If it's at all difficult to sense the breath, take one hand and put it on your belly and feel the rise and fall of belly in the palm of your hand. You can just leave it there for quite a while.

As you rest in the present, feel each breath as it comes and goes. Let the attention to breathing, with some ease and calming, invite the body and mind to come together just here. Let the thoughts and feelings and sounds rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

After just a minute or two, you'll notice that while you attend to the breath for a short time, one of the waves becomes so strong it pulls your attention from the breath, and you find yourself planning or remembering. Or there arises sadness or excitement or some other emotion or strong sensation that carries you away from the breath.

When the waves stay in the background, just feel this breath, each breath as it comes and goes. But when a wave becomes strong and captures the attention, let go of the breathing and turn as if to welcome it with a bow. You can name it gently: "Oh, planning," or "remembering," or "sadness," or "excitement," or "longing." As you name it —"sad, sad" or "excited, excited" or "planning"—feel that wave move through your body and mind.

When it has passed, or you're at ease with it, return back to feel the breath again for a time. Rest just here in the present moment, with this breath.

...or this strong wave of experience, naming it gently.

And remember to keep the heart tender, to receive all that arises with a spirit of compassion and kindness. This breath, or this moment's experience—receive it with loving awareness.

Come back to the breath when you can, quite gently, like training the puppy: sit, stay. Feel how the body breathes itself in its own rhythms. And with each breath, a sense of inviting ease and calm to grow.

Whatever is present, feel how the breath breathes itself in the midst of it all, and relax into the breathing. Rest in it with a sense of growing ease, calm.

CHAPTER 12

The Garden of the Heart

Jack Kornfield · 59 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Jack Kornfield draws upon the imagery of spring to present meditation and spiritual practice as the cultivation of an inner garden. He shares a teaching story from the early Buddhist texts where the Buddha describes his practice to a skeptical Brahmin farmer: "Trust or faith is the seed. Compassion, the rain. Wakefulness is my plow and yoke... wise effort is my oxen drawing the plow steadily toward freedom of heart."*
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> *Kornfield weaves together the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh on storehouse consciousness and the seeds we water, with contemporary examples of transformation—including Father Greg Boyle's work with gang members at Homeboy Industries and Kathy Sneed's prison garden project. He addresses both sudden and gradual awakening, noting how we've all touched moments of transcendence, whether in nature, in sacred spaces, or at life's thresholds of birth and death.*
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> *The practical teaching is clear: we cannot create a perfect garden, nor should we try. Rather, we take our "perfectly human circumstance"—with all its tension, emotion, and difficulty—and use it as the very ground for wakefulness. The obstacles that arise in meditation and life are not failures but the essential work of tending. As Kornfield reminds us through Suzuki Roshi's words: "You're perfect just as you are. And there is still room for improvement." This talk invites us to choose the seeds we plant consciously and to water the beauty not only in ourselves but in all those around us.*

Please let yourself get settled in a way that's comfortable and listen. Listening to teachings is a kind of reflection or a meditation practice. There's no quiz at the end, no exam—you've already passed. Rather, you let yourself listen and sense what's true in your own heart, what resonates for you, what reminds you of something of value. And the other things that don't resonate, just let them go by, or put them on the shelf, or whatever you do with them. You take it in as a kind of practice. And the practice is really the practice of a deeper listening—not just to these words or teachings, but looking into your own heart and your own mind. So sit comfortably.

This evening, especially since the signs of spring are here—in California, the plum blossoms are out in many places. And although we need rain, please, whoever's up there, the rain gods—the sense of spring, which comes early in California, is a really

beautiful one. You can see the light turning. And so I want to talk about our practice of mindfulness, compassion, meditation, these things, as a gardening practice, as a gardening of the heart.

This has been a difficult week in the news. There have been a lot of them, but this is one of them, with the school shooting, with the failure to solve any of the problems of immigration for the Dreamers or other people. And as most of you are aware, this is President's Day. I think about going to the Lincoln Memorial, which is one of my favorite places in Washington, and it calls itself a temple. It says, "In this great temple are the words and the memory of this man." It's like a Greek temple. And there, carved in the stone, are the words after the Civil War, which was such a horrendous trauma for the entire country: "With malice toward none and charity toward all." That is presidential leadership. That is an expression of what it means to bring people together. Like Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

There is in our history—and I feel it in our bones, in our consciousness—the understanding of what wise leadership looks like. And sometimes we get it, and sometimes we don't, and often it's kind of mixed. I'm not going to presume the politics of everyone in this room. People have all different kinds of political views. But what I do know is that amidst gun violence, amidst continuing warfare and racism and the kind of sufferings that we see in the world, there are also, even during the course of this evening talk, a billion acts of kindness that don't get featured in the news.

I remember when I was doing some peace work in Palestine and Israel some years ago, what struck me was how many groups there were. I met with a number of them: the Gandhian peace group, a nonviolent peace group that was growing in Palestine, the Former Combatants for Peace, the Bereaved Mothers, the Sulha that was bringing together teenagers from Palestine and Israel. There were hundreds of amazing groups doing things that you never hear about. All you hear about is if somebody throws a hand grenade or some terrorist attack or someone getting shot. The news is kind of a race to the bottom of the brain stem, basically. Let's try and scare people, and then they'll be frightened and they'll vote for us. It's more or less how politics seems to work.

But it's not what President's Day celebrates. I think we have it combining Lincoln and Washington—from my childhood, we used to have separate President's Days, remember. It is really a celebration of human possibility. And for us, no matter what happens outside, that is what we have to carry as a vision and a possibility in our hearts.

Now here's the paradox. As human beings, we are made of stars and we're made of mud. And we carry all of these possibilities within us. Zen Master Suzuki Roshi said, "You're perfect just as you are. And there is still room for improvement." Right? Part of what we need to understand is how to cherish ourselves and how to be real with ourselves and life as it is. And at the same time, also understand in this paradoxical way that there are still greater possibilities for each of us and for the collective—of compassion, connection, understanding, and so forth. And we all know this.

In Buddhist language, there's talk of sudden and gradual enlightenment. Perhaps we'll get to enlightenment tonight. Perhaps we won't. But let's just call it sudden and gradual awakening. And we've all had it, actually—walking in the mountains, or entering a great cathedral, or hearing an extraordinary piece of music, or making love, or being with someone as they're giving birth, or giving birth yourself, that mystery. Or sitting at the bedside of someone as they die, and the spirit leaves the body, and the gates between the worlds open up and you wonder: What is this human incarnation that lasts for a time and then is gone, just like that? Or you're standing by the Grand Canyon, or you've taken some sacred medicine. There are a hundred ways that we've touched this—where we step out of the small sense of self, what's called the body of fear, the separateness, and feel ourselves truthfully to be part of something so much greater, which is the energy that gave life to us and is the turning of the galaxies and the stars, because that's what we are. We come from this.

And yes, we have to tend this separateness. As Ram Dass likes to say, you have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number. There's some kind of paradox that you have to work with. But there's also a timeless reality, the ever-present eternal in which we live. And the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. What does it mean to live in mystery rather than just have your list and check off the to-do things—things you have to shop and buy or complete or turn in or send or get? Those are all fine things. But if that's all that makes up our life, something profound is missing, something that nourishes us.

So we all know this somehow. And in some way, entering a spiritual practice of meditation and mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion practice—these are really gateways to open us to that which is bigger than ourselves. Our connection with all life, our sense of that mystery that we can rest in, of that which is timeless.

It's a beautiful thing to watch when I go up to visit the two-month retreat, or even a week-long or ten-day retreat—people get younger. We talk about it as the Vipassana facelift. By the end of ten days or so, people come in and they're tired and haggard. They did a lot in order to make their week or ten days free. And then you start to see

their brows clear and their eyes grow brighter. They're walking around and they take time to look at the flowers and smell the spring air. It's as if their vitality and their beauty and their youth starts to shine again, because they've stopped and slowed down and tended themselves with loving awareness, their own body and breath. And in doing so, they've opened themselves to these other dimensions, which is what we are. Anything important or good that we do has to be connected with what we are. You could call it love or mystery or consciousness, interbeing. It's a beautiful thing.

And so when we come and sit in meditation, it isn't so much to have a good meditation, because you get everything in there. That's what happens. You sit down and you get your own mind. As I like to joke, borrowing from my friend Anne Lamott, she says, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone." So you come with other people, right? You get it all. But the point isn't the particular experience. The point is to get bigger than being caught in those things that come—your fears and longings and hopes and all of those things—so that you become the witnessing of it, the place of loving awareness, of compassion that says, "Yes, this, and even more." You open yourself so that you can live with love for yourself and others. Because in the end, what matters?

So there's the sudden awakening. But the other image that's used is gradual awakening. And here you sit, and there's the monkey mind. Some of you may have noticed that, or the tension in your body, or all the stories that get told, or all those other kinds of things that arise. And the question is, here we are in this human incarnation—I don't know how you got in there, but you're here—and you're sitting here with it. How do you respond to all this stuff?

A story from the early days of the Buddha's teaching: He went out with his alms bowl and approached an area owned by a wealthy Brahmin that was being plowed in the spring plowing. The wealthy Brahmin was distributing food to all the workers. When he saw the Buddha come with his alms bowl, he said, "Ah, monk, I plow and sow and work, and having plowed and sown, then I eat. Why don't you likewise plow and sow, and having plowed and sowed, eat?" He was challenging him—like, come on, you're a mendicant, get with the program and do something worthwhile.

And the Buddha says, I also, Brahman, plow and sow, and having done so, I eat. And the Brahman says, you claim yourself a plowman, but I see no plow. Tell me, what kind of plowing is it you do?

And the Buddha replies: Trust or faith is the seed. Compassion, the rain. Wakefulness is my plow and yoke. Conscience, my guide. And my mind is the harness. Clarity is the plow blade, and well-guarded in action and speech, I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen, drawing the plow steadily toward freedom of heart—that which can never be regretted.

He offers this little poem in response. And this bears the fruit of liberation. Then the Brahman says, "Ah, then let the venerable monk eat. You are indeed a plowman." Somehow he convinces him.

Now there's an interesting end to this story, because the Brahmin takes a pitcher of milk rice to pour into the alms bowl of the Buddha. And as it pours into the bowl, it hisses with steam and won't stay in the bowl. Of course these stories are both literal stories and metaphors—they're mythological stories. And so you can listen to them in a different way. Why would it hiss and steam? If any of you have ever had the joy of being in a field that's been plowed and touching the plow blade after it's cut a long furrow through the earth, you know it gets very hot. The iron gets really hot. So here's the Buddha's alms bowl. You want to give me something? Let me show you something. Pour in the milk rice. The plow is still hot from the inner work that I've done.

That's the story. And it's a beautiful one because, following Suzuki Roshi—yes, you're perfect the way you are and there's still room for improvement—it really speaks about the seeds that we plant. Having tended them with wise effort as the oxen and the rain of compassion, beautiful fruit will come: the fruit of freedom of heart, the fruit of well-being.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh's way of describing it. Your mind is like a piece of earth planted with many different kinds of seeds. Sometimes he talks about it as storehouse consciousness, with all the different possibilities, the archetypal seeds within it. In this piece of earth with different seeds, there are seeds of joy, of peace, of mindfulness, understanding, and love. There are seeds of craving, of anger, of fear, hate, and forgetfulness. The healthy seeds and the unhealthy seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind and heart. The quality of your life depends on the seeds that you water. If you plant tomato seeds in your garden, tomatoes will grow. Just so, if you water a seed of peace in your heart and mind, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you become happy. When the seed of anger is watered, you become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.

This is really an instruction that's gone down now for 2,600 years, from the Buddha's image to the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh—what it means to begin to tend the garden of our own heart and our own life. Because nobody else can tend it for you, as you've probably noticed. They try online, but it just doesn't work.

Now what happens when you tend the garden of the heart—when you look into what seeds you are watering, what you are planting—is that as you begin to practice what's called appamada, or presence, not being lost, when you become more present, first of all, things start to change in a beautiful way. Modern neuroscience talks about how even in six or eight weeks of training the mind in meditation and the heart, there are measurable changes in the telomeres at the caps on the ends of chromosomes, epigenetic changes, changes in brain structure, and so forth.

But basically what happens is that you become present for your experience and you relate to it in a different way. You don't just get lost in it. When anger comes, you don't just water the anger and get lost in it. When longing comes, you don't just follow that story. Instead, there grows a capacity for spaciousness and perspective and some peacefulness.

You begin to water the seeds of peace and presence and mindfulness as you do, step by step.

And step by step, in this part of the teaching—the gradual teaching—is the game.

My beloved friend and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, was nominated for the Nobel Prize a whole number of different times. Even though he was a scholar who spoke fifteen languages, after the Cambodian Khmer Rouge genocide, he led peace marches—peace walks really—from all the refugee camps on the Thai border, which held hundreds of thousands, maybe a million people. He said, "You can't go back to your villages where the temples were burned and all the intellectuals were killed and almost a quarter of the population died. You can't go back unless you reclaim the land with your own love and your heart."

And so he would lead streams of a thousand people in a bus or the back of a truck, with someone beating a drum and someone ringing a bell, singing the chant of loving-kindness: "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law." And they would recite it over and over and walk back to their villages, reclaiming the land through killing fields, until they felt that they could again plant the seeds of love in ground that had grown so barren.

This is the game—to make our life beautiful. You set a direction. You set the intention of your heart, which is the seeds of compassion, of wakefulness, of being present, of mindfulness. You plant those seeds, and then those seeds have a certain power to grow if you dedicate yourself to them.

But the other thing that happens—and anyone who's ever gardened knows this—is that obstacles will arise. You know how it works, right? There are insects, there is drought, there are weeds that try to take it over. There's compacted soil with no aeration. I don't need to take you by the hand to the local nursery, but they would read you the litany of things you have to tend to make the garden really blossom and bloom.

And this is true in any enterprise we undertake. You know it in parenting, in love relations, in business. You plant this seed—you say, "I'm going to start a business." Let's say your business is your garden. And then you hit the obstacles. Not enough capital. A key employee quits. The market changes. Interest rates rise. Competition becomes stiffer. The supplier gets bought up. All this stuff happens. Anybody who's a business person knows this. You set your direction, you plant your seeds, and then you tend the obstacles, and you keep going.

In parenting, first they just want to put everything in their mouth, right? And hit each other with blocks. And then they fall off their bicycles and have injuries. And then you have to socialize them to play with each other. And then they have to go through middle school. Oh my God. There's puberty and teenage angst and then sexuality and cars and alcohol and drugs and independence. It's rough, right? For everybody. It's also totally wonderful—I just couldn't be happier being a parent. And yet, there's obstacles.

Social change—the same kind of thing. You look around and you say, this is crazy. We're solving our world problems with war. In kindergarten, when kids hit each other with blocks, you say, "Use your words," right? Why couldn't that go up a little bit to the adult level? And there's racism, which is insane. Let's see, what color are you? You're brown, you're pink—I mean, give me a break.

It makes no sense. There are children starving today while grain elevators overflow with more food than we know what to do with. And it's not complicated—just ten percent of what we spend globally on military weapons (and we are the great military weapons supplier of the planet) would feed every hungry woman and child and man on this earth. What are we doing?

So you say, all right, we have to do something about it. But when you try to engage in social change, what do you encounter? Political obstacles, doubts, financial problems, squabbles between people. All the best activists fight with each other at certain times—not all of them, but you know how it goes, right? Because they're activists in there, passionate and driven.

So you have to meet the obstacles in love. It's the same as in relationships. You seem compatible at first. You fall in love and it's just great. And then that little disappointment starts to creep in, the shadow side, because you imagined them to be a certain way, and then it turns out they're messier or more irritable or anxious or judging or controlling or addicted or whatever it is. And oh my God, I thought you were this person, but I didn't realize I was getting the whole catastrophe.

And back to social change—let's talk about gun control for a moment. Being a country with more guns per capita than any other country in the world, there has to be something sensible. And I think about the children, because I actually believe that what's happening now with the young people from Florida may—may—be a game changer. The margins are the place where real life lives, not in the center of the consciousness of the country, but among the disenfranchised and the children and the elders and the people who've been kept out. They're the ones who actually still carry the possibility and the vision.

A poem from my friend Jane Hirshfield, a great poet in Mill Valley. She writes: "The dead do not want us dead. Such petty errors are left for the living. Nor do they want our mourning. No gift to them, not rage, not weeping. Return one of them, any one of them, to the earth and look—such foolish skipping, such telling of bad jokes, such feasting. Even a cucumber, even a single sesame seed, a feast."

We have to treasure life and the life of our children more than our guns. We have to treasure this earth in ways that we haven't before. And yes, there are obstacles. That doesn't mean we stop doing whatever we think is really right.

So there we are—obstacles that come. And guess what? Your spiritual practice is basically a practice of, as you garden, working with the obstacles.

The first question is: What are you going to devote yourself to? What are the seeds that you want to plant? If somebody asked you this year, or this decade—would it be seeds of kindness? Would it be a peaceful heart? Would it be seeds of mindfulness? Seeds of compassion and care for yourself? Seeds of compassion and care for others around the world? What are the seeds you would plant? Seeds of love? What will you devote yourself to?

And then, as you begin to meditate—which is like training wheels for living with some consciousness—your body tension and the untamed mind and the unfinished business of the heart and the grief that you carry, the ocean of tears that make up human life, because you're a human being and you carry a certain measure of the sorrows of the world, and the radiance of your heart—all these things will arise. And what do you do with them?

"Just as the water jar is filled drop by drop, so let those who are wise fill themselves moment by moment with goodness." This is from the Buddha. And the goodness is: no matter what arises, can you meet it with compassion? No matter what arises, can you become spacious and peaceful, not so lost and caught up and reactive? Not because you're supposed to, not because it's a grim duty, but because it's actually an invitation to return to your own Buddha nature, to who you really are.

What's important somehow in this is to stay connected with the seeds that you plant. "As a farmer channels water to their land, so the wise ones direct their own heart and mind."

Again, from the text of the Buddha.

This last week I went to a lecture at LMU, Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, given by a friend and a really wonderful man named Father Greg Boyle. He's written a couple of bestsellers, and I can't commend his books to you enough. *Tattoos on the Heart* is the first of them, if you haven't read it. He's the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, and for thirty-some years now he's been working with kids coming out of gangs. They have Homeboy Bakery and Homeboy Cafe; they have all kinds of services for the city removing tagging and graffiti; they've got all kinds of businesses. But mostly what his work is, is to tend the soul and the spirit of these young men and young women who in many cases don't really have a family, or don't have a safe place to live. And so they join a gang because that's what's there. But they also know that it's tremendously destructive. He talks about it beautifully in his book, and I really, really recommend it to you.

Part of what he does is keep notes of the kind of strange malaprops and language that some of his homies like to use. For example, one of the young guys who'd been working with him for a while—he sends them out to talk about Homeboy Industries—came in one day and said, "I'm really learning how to do public speaking. You know, you have to be self-defecating." And Father Greg said, "Oh, that's something I've been meaning to practice."

He describes one day after working for a long time with a whole group of young men who'd come in tattooed, trying to figure out whether they would get out of the gangs or not. Some of them come and go, and it takes four or five, six, eight different times before they really can land at Homeboys. He said, "After a long day, another father and I finally went upstairs. We were reading the paper and just having a quiet time and a cup of tea. And there's loud, insistent knocking on the door. We kind of know who it is—it's this very insistent person who's homeless and difficult and comes around often needing stuff." And it's like, okay, after a day. Finally the other father gets up and says, "All right, I'll answer it." He's there for like twenty minutes and then he comes back. Father Greg looks up and says, "So who was that?" He said, "It was Jesus in his least recognizable form."

You've got to have humor about this for it to work.

I'll read you one part from this book, because at all of the talks that he gives—and now he goes around the country talking about really the redemption that's possible for these young people—if you go there, it's quite extraordinary. He says, "I always bring a couple of homies with me to talk. They get up and they tell their story."

He said, "So we were flying, a long flight, and I took a couple of homies who were from different gangs. I like to mix them up. One of them worked at the bakery, and the other one worked in their store, their shop that sells Homeboy stuff. They got to the airport. They'd never flown. They were terrified. And so we're looking out the window and two of the flight attendants are going up the steps with cups of Starbucks coffee. And I said, 'Well, must be pretty soon it'll be time to take off because they're trying to sober up the pilot.'" He said, "I know that wasn't fair to say to these guys, but anyway—" You've got to mess with him sometimes.

And he says, "All right, it's a thousand people, psychologists and social workers in this major city, and I want you to tell your stories first, and then I'll talk about how I work."

So they get there, Mario and Bobby, and they were both nervous. Their accounts moved people very deeply because their stories were filled with violence, abandonment, abuse, torture, homelessness of every kind. Honest to God, if their stories had been flames, you'd have to keep your distance. Otherwise, you'd get scorched. This is really the work he's thrown himself into.

So they spoke before me. And then before I presented, because I wanted to include them, I asked if anyone there had any questions for these guys. They were both nervous. Once things quieted down, a woman raised her hand. She had a question for Mario, and he started to quake, like, "How do I do this?"

"Yes," he said.

She said, "You're a father. You've been at Homeboys for eight years or nine years. Your son and daughter are starting to reach their teenage years. What wisdom do you impart to them?"

And his sobbing was now more pronounced. The woman was silent. No one said anything, just as you're being silent now. She stood up again. Now it was her turn to cry. And she pointed at him, and her voice, quite certain through her tears, said, "Mario, why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you? You are gentle. You are kind." He was known as being a gentleman at Homeboys. "You are loving. You are wise." She planted herself firmly. "I hope your kids turn out like you."

And there wasn't much of a pause before all one thousand attendees stood up and began to clap. The ovation seemed to have no end. All Mario could do was hold his face in his hands, overwhelmed with emotion.

What Father Greg has done is to tend the seeds of goodness in these young people that come to see him. And he does it over and over. And if they fail, he says, "Then come back when you're ready to try again."

And this is what our human life is about—to direct ourselves towards something that has some nobility to it, that's honorable and moving to our own heart and beautiful. To plant those seeds and stay connected with them. Now the great thing is that you have good seeds to plant. That is born in you. And as Henry David Thoreau says, "Though I do not believe a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

And you have in you the seeds of great compassion. You have in you the seeds of wisdom, the seeds of kinship with life, of care for others. And meditation then isn't to make some special experience because you sit and everything happens. It's to learn how to tend this garden of your own humanity—to water the seeds of kindness, to water the seeds of presence, to water the seeds of attention and care, to water those seeds that are the most beautiful in your own heart.

As the Buddha taught, "As the bee gathers nectar and perfume from the flower without marring its beauty, so let the wise one move through this world, harming none and bringing blessings to all." When you tend the seeds in your garden and the flowers and the fruits and the vegetables bloom, you become like that image of the bee tending what's beautiful, bringing forth good in yourself and those around you, what you value, without harm.

Now here's another really important thing to keep in mind for spiritual practice. The idea is not to make a perfect garden—you know, one of those photos in House and Garden, the coolest garden in Marin County or something like that. It's sort of like all the photos on the covers of magazines of models, the most handsome or beautiful human being you've ever seen, taken in the best light and then touched up. Nobody looks like that. You know that's true. And no garden looks like that except on that day when everything's taken out and they get the photographers in the right light on a spring day at the best angle. They don't show you the compost pile and the weeds.

We have these ideas of how it should be. I remember this cartoon of two little fish swimming in the water. One says to the other, "I want the whole thing—the glass bowl, the little white castle, the blue pebbles." We have these ideas. They're crazy, these notions about how it should be. Instead of trying to make an ideal of your life—which you've already failed at. You know that.

We all have. Let's be serious about it. As Zen Master Ryokan said, "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change." So here you are.

The idea isn't to make a perfect garden, but to take your perfectly human circumstance—your emotions, your thoughts, your body, for better and for worse, and bodies are always for better and for worse. To take your relationships, oh my God. And your family. Remember, Buddha and Jesus had trouble when they went back to their families too, so just keep that in mind. To take your perfectly human circumstance and use that for wakefulness and compassion and steadiness and letting go and learning to trust. There's no other place to do it. No other way to do it.

Alan Chadwick was a famous gardener at UC Santa Cruz, one of the founders of the modern environmental movement. He gardened by growing soil to grow plants, and what he meant by soil was different from the earth's surface that you or I usually mean. I think he meant the power in the universe that could be concentrated in a garden to capture cosmic magic. Chadwick grew soil and planted seeds based on relationships that existed between the earth, its moon, the sun, the other planets, the weather, the way doves in the area coo, the mist in the trees, and everything you could imagine.

When winter was bleak, he'd sing about the energies underneath the surface of the earth: "Underneath, the seeds are full of life. This very moment, the seeds are waking up. They're pushing up to the sun. The doves are singing, coo, coo, life."

Once, Professor Chadwick took his class to a junkyard lot full of rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, and lots of abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. The owner said, "Sure, but you're crazy—that soil is dead." The garden later became famous for its extraordinarily delicious vegetables and gorgeous flowers.

This is the tending that you can do in your own life, moment by moment, person by person. And it's not about being idealistic. As my teacher in the monastery would say on a super hot, sweltering day, or a freezing cold day, or a day when we got very little food in our alms bowl, "Ah, conditions are perfect for awakening." They are.

Now, you don't want to try so hard. It's not about striving. It's really about tending. You don't pull the leaves of the flower open for it to blossom. You water it. You tend it. You let the sun shine on it.

Lauren Slater writes: "Especially in this time of managed care, more emphasis seems to be placed upon medication and the quick amelioration of symptoms, short-term work, and profit—privatized profit-making clinics—than upon the lovely and mysterious alchemy that comprises the healing cords between and within people, the cords that soothe our terrors and help us to be whole." This is true in medicine. There's something that needs to be tended in addition to the body that we know about. And it's true in our relationships. It's true in the society in which we live.

So it's not about making this some kind of grim duty. Actually, it's an act of love. And that's kind of the game. In the end, if your spiritual practice isn't an act of love, it's somehow gone down the wrong track. It's planted the wrong garden.

So you get comfortable with your life. This is what you got.

You can change where you live and so forth. But the big change that needs to be tended is really the change in the heart. Because wherever you go, there will be people who are difficult. You know they're waiting for you, right? And yet, the teachings are an invitation to freedom of heart. The Dharma is an invitation to freedom. It's immediate, here and now, open-handed, offered to all—a freedom that can be found only and just where you are.

Now it's also true, as you sit, as you practice, that you can't measure it very well. How am I doing? Some days you think you're doing splendidly, and then something happens and you feel like you're the great spiritual failure. And then you tell stories about it. But it's more like being on a boat on the ocean. If you're on a river, you watch the shore go by, but if you're out on the ocean, you actually can't tell exactly where you are. And there is no spiritual GPS—I'm sorry to tell you about this. Instead, what you get to do wherever you are is tend your garden, plant the beautiful seeds.

This from Wendell Berry, a great poet and environmentalist. He writes: "So my friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the world. Work out of love for nothing. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. And go with your love to the fields and lie down in the shade and rest your head." Plant sequoias—you know, that take a thousand years to grow majestic.

So there you are. You can't tell how you're doing. I mean, if you really want to know, you could, of course, ask the people in your family—but that's another story. You can't tell how you're doing. What you'll see is tension and difficulty in your body, because you have a physical body, and also potential to live with this body in a healthy and beautiful way. But it will have pain. Anybody not have pain, you can have your money back. Right? You just get suffering along with joy in this life. This is human incarnation.

And then you notice the judging mind and the doubting mind and the frightened mind and the angry mind. There's praise and blame and gain and loss. This is the working stuff of a human incarnation. Don't tell too many stories about it. Name it. Water the beautiful seeds. Let the other ones go by. It's not that complicated. Water the seeds of love, of compassion, of presence.

Because your stories are likely—and "likely" I would underline—to be inaccurate. I remember at the end of a retreat we had down in Joshua Tree, in Yucca Valley. We used this wonderful retreat center, Institute of Mental Physics, for thirty-eight years. And there was a woman who left the retreat—she told me this story later.

She went to Palm Springs Airport and got a bag of her favorite chocolate chip cookies that they sold at one of the market stores there. She went to the waiting area of her gate and sat down. There were a bunch of seats and little tables every three or four seats. She put her cookies and her stuff down and sat there for a while just looking at her phone or whatever you do in an airport these days.

Then she noticed that the guy next to her was opening her bag of cookies. That was really weird. He took one out and ate it, and he looked at her as he did it and tipped the bag to her like, "You want one too?" She was thinking, "Okay, I don't know about this." So without saying any words but feeling really strange, he ate a cookie and she ate a cookie. What is happening here, right? She was somewhat upset by it, but okay, coming from a retreat, she thought, "I'll be compassionate," and so forth.

So then it was time to get on the plane. The cookies were gone. She got her stuff, settled into her seat, and as she was putting her stuff away, she opened her purse—and there was her bag of cookies.

Don't put too much stock in the stories you tell about yourself in the world. There's always another point of view. And then you see, you are the Buddha, but you're embarrassed Buddha, chagrin Buddha, foolish Buddha, as Ryokan said. "You know, this year no change." There's happy Buddha and sad Buddha, sun Buddha, moon Buddha. You contain all of these. And you rest in the mystery of being alive—this amazing thing that you have this life and you get to shape it. You get to make something beautiful out of it.

I think that's why, in a certain way, people have helped to build this place at Spirit Rock—not as a monument to something, but really as a place that's a reminder of how magnificent you are and what you can be, what beautiful seeds you can plant and how you can tend them. And that you can trust this.

Pablo Neruda says, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's some life force that wants to renew us. Even in the body politic, which seems so divisive now, and in many ways destructive—and worse than that—at times it feels like we are, instead of, as Lincoln said, "with malice toward none and charity toward all," almost reversing it. We're dividing those who are valued and those who are vulnerable and are not valued, and throwing them out of our hearts and out of our willingness to be in communion.

And yet, we are in communion. Every breath you take is breathed by all those other people. Every breath you take, as I say, came over the Pacific and dusted Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, and before that it dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. We are in this one together. This is our family.

Pablo Neruda, so beautiful. But if you plant seeds, then something good will come. As Thoreau said, "I don't know how long it will take, but I'm prepared to expect miracles and wonders." Pablo Neruda also wrote another line for spring, one of his love poems. He said, "I want to do with you what spring does to the cherry trees." How's that for a little romantic line?

So Kathy Sneed, some years ago in the 1980s, started a prison garden project. She was concerned for the soul death of so many people who've been incarcerated. Sadly, we have these enormous racist poverty prisons—if you're born in the wrong place or the wrong race or wrong skin color, the likelihood is you're going to end up in prison, and not for doing much. So she began a project in the San Francisco City and County Jail, which is a pretty big establishment. Men were invited to grow vegetables in a garden plot behind one of the prison buildings, which had been there from decades before when there had been a prison garden. Through fundraising, she was able to offer them seedlings and mulch, fertilizer and simple garden tools.

To be able to grow a garden with their own hands, to be responsible for its blossoming, to overcome insects and drought—this brought out the best in these thrown away people. It awakened a connection to and caring for something outside of themselves. Kathy tells about one macho giant saying, "Don't step on my babies," as he walked through the garden.

The prison wardens were amazed by the change. The gardens became so important to those who cared for these patches that their lives began to revolve around them. In fact, when time came for these men to be released from prison, some purposefully recommitted petty crimes or violated parole so they could get back to their gardens. That's when Kathy realized that she needed to start a garden project for ex-prisoners, which she did.

"Do not judge me by my successes," says Nelson Mandela. "Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

Tend your garden in a way that's beautiful. Choose the seeds. Even as you listen tonight, you know what the seeds are that you really would most want to plant in this incarnation, in this life. And then water them with your attention, with your dedication, with your devotion.

I'll close with a blessing from John O'Donohue, that wonderful poet. He writes:

On the day when the weight deadens on your shoulders and you stumble, may the clay dance to balance you. And when your eyes freeze behind the gray window and the ghost of loss gets into you, may a flock of colors—indigo, red, green, and azure blue—come to awaken in you a meadow of delight. When the canvas frays and the cork of thought and the stain of ocean blackens beneath you, may there come across the waters a path of yellow moonlight to bring you safely home. May the nourishment of the earth be yours. May

the clarity of light be yours. May the fluency of the ocean be yours. And may the protection of the ancestors be yours. And so may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to tend your life.

One more reflection came as we were sitting quietly. You don't just water your own seeds. There are gardens next to yours that could also be quite beautiful, and you have water to spare. The world needs you to also water the seeds of goodness, of compassion, of presence, of dedication around you. The society needs it—whether it's raising conscious children or creating a conscious business or standing up for justice or standing for the vulnerable or tending them. But to do so in a way that waters the beauty in them and the best in them.

As Nelson Mandela said, "It never hurts to think the best of someone. They often act the better because of it."

Seek out your ways to water the seeds of goodness and make a difference both in your own heart and in all that you touch in the world.

Enjoy the spring.

CHAPTER 13

A Peaceful Heart – How to Live with Balance, Equanimity and a Peaceful Heart

Jack Kornfield · 1h00

> *In this profound teaching on upekkhā (equanimity), Jack Kornfield shares insights from his recent meeting with the Dalai Lama, who emphasized the importance of teaching cessation—the possibility of freedom and peace for all beings. Drawing from the Four Noble Truths and Suzuki Roshi's wisdom that finding composure amidst change is the gateway to nibbāna, Kornfield explores how equanimity differs from indifference. While indifference is withdrawal born of fear, true equanimity is the willingness to be fully present in life while holding a vast, spacious perspective.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together teachings from diverse sources—Chuang Tzu's empty boat parable, Zen Master Ryokan's poetry, and Thich Nhat Hanh's reflections on birth and death—to illuminate how we can meet life's inevitable gains and losses, pleasures and pains, with grace. He shares moving personal experiences from Cambodian refugee camps, where survivors planted gardens despite losing everything, demonstrating life's innate drive toward renewal. The talk addresses the balance between inner peace and engaged action, using examples from Rosa Parks to the March for Our Lives, showing how a peaceful heart can fuel courageous action.*
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> *The practice of equanimity meditation is offered as a complement to loving-kindness and compassion, helping free us from codependence while maintaining deep care. Kornfield guides listeners toward recognizing their true nature as loving awareness itself—the vast stillness that witnesses all experience. This teaching invites us not to let fear colonize our hearts, but to become lamps of peace in an ever-changing world, honoring the Buddha's final words: 'Make of yourself a light.'*

Let yourself come back in and find a way to sit. Let things quiet down a little bit.

Let's do a little one-syllable chant just to recollect the energy after the social time. The one-syllable chant is a seed syllable in Sanskrit that's considered the syllable representing great wisdom—the seed syllable "ah." It's the sound of opening, of letting go, of receiving. So let's just sing "ah" for a little bit and then sit for half a minute or so in the stillness afterward.

Chanting

Well, that kind of did it, didn't it? That was nice. And I'm not sure which I like better—the harmony, which gets very sweet, or the silence afterward.

So here you've come Monday night into this beautiful temple. I'd like to speak about the quality of equanimity.

I've just come back from travels in Asia—Japan, and Dharamsala, India—being part of the Mind Life Science meetings with the Dalai Lama and various scientists and social scientists from around the world. This one focused on education and social and emotional learning. Through the days we were together for a good part of a week, the Dalai Lama kept his focus on this: "All right, we have good science about these things now. How do we change the world? How do we make the world better for our children, for adults, for people who are vulnerable?" Over and over again: What's best for the world? How do we use this?

And then when we had a chance to talk together a little bit privately, a little bit of Dharma conversation, he said, "Now when you teach, you must emphasize cessation." Then he went on to explain what he meant by that. In the Buddhist teachings of the four basic truths or noble truths, there's suffering and its causes, and then there's an end to it. He went on to say, "You must teach people that there's freedom and goodness that's possible for each of them and for this world—that that's what's possible."

When greed, hatred, and delusion are released and given up, it says in the Buddhist texts, we no longer cause sorrow for ourselves and others. This is nirvana. Or as Zen master Suzuki Roshi said, "When you realize the fact that everything changes and find your composure in the midst of it, this is the gateway to nirvana"—or to well-being, or to peace.

So this is what the Dalai Lama was urging: remind people what's possible, how it is possible to live.

This is also the last of the series of ten talks on the qualities of the awakened heart—equanimity, or peace. They're called the qualities of the awakened heart because they're not found someplace else. You don't have to go to the Himalayas or to Kyoto in Japan. They're the nature of the heart and mind itself. "Luminous is this mind," it says in the Buddhist teachings, but it gets confused by the various thoughts and feelings that color it. When we see them arise, it's sort of like the leaves fluttering on a tree. When the wind comes up, we think that everything's moving, but actually the tree is still there, and the leaves flutter and then quiet down again.

Our fundamental state is peaceful. It just gets bothered by stuff, you know—life and the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the people in your family and money problems and work and all of those things. And yet underneath it all, there's a substrate of stillness, an understanding, a sense that you have when I ask that question: How would it be to live with a peaceful heart? Most people in the room—I couldn't see you all, but I could see some of your thoughts were like, "Yeah, pretty good idea. Actually, it would help."

And so what you also could see in that brief meditation on equanimity is that we can be reminded, we can invite, we can turn toward certain qualities—whether it's compassion or loving-kindness, or respect for one another, or understanding. And when we turn toward them, the mind is malleable. It's pliant. When we turn our consciousness or our attention in a particular direction, that's what flowers.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, when you water certain seeds, they blossom. If you water the seeds of peace, guess what? They grow. You feel them come alive. And if you water the seeds of resentment or disappointment, those too will grow. Unfortunately, you've noticed that.

Dharma, which is a very complex or multi-meaning word in Sanskrit, means the teachings. It means the truth or the law. It means one's particular destiny. It has all these meanings. But here in the temple, the dharma teachings are the teachings of the way things are—the kind of fundamental universal truths to help us live wisely.

And equanimity grows when we have a vast perspective. It's in certain ways the culmination of the practices of a spiritual life. Zen Master Ryokan, the most beloved poet of Japan, writes: "If someone asks me what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Wealth and honor are nothing but dust. As evening falls, I sit in my hermitage and stretch out both feet in answer."

There's a kind of ease and relaxation. Wealth and honor—these things come and go. But if you want to know about a peaceful heart, stretch out your feet. Notice the changing of the light. We've gone from that beautiful green landscape through the twilight and now into spring evening darkness. Find in yourself a way to rest in the midst of all things.

Now, it's also true—well, here's another early Buddhist text: Some children were playing beside a river. They made castles of sand. Each child defended their castle and said, "This one is mine." They kept them separate and wouldn't let any mistakes about whose was whose. When they were finished, sometimes they visited, but sometimes

they fought. The owner of one castle got angry and pulled another child's hair—"You spoiled my castle!"—and they all kind of ganged up on one child, and then he found other friends. We know how human beings are, it says in here.

But then evening came. It was getting dark, and they all thought it was time to go home. Their mothers were calling them. And no one cared what became of their castle. One child stamped on his. The waves washed over another. They turned away and all went back home.

This is an ancient Buddhist text, and it's somehow written to remind us of something, if you hadn't noticed. The things that make up our life, that matter, that we can care about—they don't last.

You have many incarnations. I think about my early childhood and my middle school years and the time I lived as a monk and when I first got married—all those things are gone. The houses I lived in are gone. Some were torn down. If I could go back, they don't even exist anymore. That whole thing just disappeared. And then at some point, I'll be gone. People who knew me will remember me. "Oh, yes"—a little sadness—"I'll miss them." And then they'll be gone. And then, okay, boop. It's gone. It's what happens. It's the sandcastle thing. It's really, really true.

So then, how do we live? What's wise?

There are the worldly winds. There's praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain. In Ecclesiastes it says there's a time for planting and a time for sowing and reaping, birth and death. There's a time for every season, and it keeps changing, doesn't it? Let's get real about it. Praise and blame. So what do we do?

And then there comes a sense of grace. Not because everything will go the way you want it to. There's still warfare and racism and environmental destruction and things that we have to tend to. But there's also a bigger story. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And we can also sense the truth of that.

I remember when I was working in the Cambodian refugee camps many years ago. It was a dry, barren, hot place—the hot season—flat, with a big pit well at one end that people would walk down into with their buckets. And everybody had a little tiny hut made of bamboo. Fifty or a hundred thousand people in each camp, and these huts were made of woven bamboo, maybe six feet wide and eight feet long with a little door and some cloth hung over it.

Next to each hut's door, along the path, there was a little plot of land—maybe one square yard, one square meter—between the door and the next hut, with little paths running between them. And after a month or two, almost everybody had planted a garden. They'd lost everything. People in their families had been killed, their villages burned. There they were with nothing. And yet there was a little squash plant, a bean plant, a pepper plant. They would go every day and stand in the hot sun in these long lines, get the water, and tend their plants.

It was an extraordinary thing to watch—this sense that there's something in life itself that will renew itself. It wants to. It's its nature. And it's possible to begin to trust in that way.

So equanimity doesn't mean indifference. That's called the near enemy to equanimity—it masquerades as the real thing. But indifference is fear or withdrawal, insulation. "I don't want life to touch me." Equanimity is the willingness to be in life but to be spacious and open, to have a vast perspective and say, "Yes, here I am, showing up, caring, loving—but I'm not in control of this game." And I hope you've noticed that.

So there's less of what Chuang Tzu describes—less person in the boat, less "me" and "mine" and "the way it should be." It's not that there won't be self-consciousness and the small sense of self and the body of fear and all those things that arise as part of our nature. But it's almost like, "Oh yeah, there's that. That's the personality. That's okay. But it's not the real story."

And you discover through your meditation practice—those of you who have a meditation practice or your inner spiritual life—the capacity of your heart to move with all things, to embrace the mystery, the changing mystery of life. And it is a mystery. Nobody knows. Who are you, really?

How did you get here? How did all the stars and planets come to be? Nobody has the answer to that. It says in one of the Buddhist texts, "Thus shall you think of this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream." It appears, and it's mysterious that it appears, and then it's gone.

You remember Y2K, right? What happened to it? It's back with the pharaohs and back with *I Love Lucy* and the Middle Ages. It goes back into wherever it came from, to emptiness. And another day says, "All right, here we're going to have another day." But things appear and then they disappear.

And we know intuitively that there is a way to find balance. My teacher Ajahn Chah said in almost all his teachings that he didn't really teach anybody anything. He just said if they were falling off the road on one side, he'd say, "Go that way, go back to the

middle." If they were falling off the left-hand side, he'd say, "Go back that way." He said, "That's all I do. People get attached here. They get afraid there. I say, come back. Be here in the present." And as you are, be here with a loving awareness of this life because it's all you have. This is it.

And this, just as you know how to ride a bike—you learn it, and when you learn it, you know that balance—there's a kind of inner learning of balance. And then gradually you learn to trust. You don't need your bike just to be on a really flat, simple place. You can take it places. And then when difficulty comes, you have this capacity.

This is from Zen master Suzuki Roshi. He says, "Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease. You don't know what to do. You can't lie in bed normally. The most comfortable place for you would be a warm, comfortable bed, but now because of your mental agony, you cannot rest. You may walk up and down, pace in and out, but this doesn't help. Actually, the best way to relieve your mental suffering is to sit in meditation, even in such a confused state of mind and with a bad posture. If you have no experience of sitting in this kind of difficult situation, you're not yet a real meditation student. For no other activity can appease your suffering. In continuous practice, under a succession of agreeable and disagreeable situations, you will realize the marrow of meditation and acquire its true strength."

So it's not saying that you won't have gain and loss and pleasure and pain and birth and death. You will have it. Anybody not have it, you can have your fifteen dollars back. It's just how it is. But we can sit with a kind of loving awareness, a sacred attention that says, "This is life." This is life with its unbearable beauty and its ocean of tears that make up our human incarnation.

I think about Rosa Parks because I love reading about her. She'd actually planned that for a while, and I remember seeing a big picture of her, this kind of luminous being. Now she knew how to sit. She said, "I just knew I had to sit there and not get up." She could come here. We want her on our faculty. "I knew I just had to stay on the bus." And there's something in that of the courage of heart that comes from a peaceful heart—to say, "Yes, I'm peaceful, and yes, I'm here. I really know what it means to be alive and present."

Part of it is the great gift of having a bigger perspective. That the arc of the moral universe is long.

It bends toward justice. Life will renew itself. Even when terrible things happen—the little plants in the gardens in the refugee camp—something will renew itself. It's not the end of the story.

And the other dimension is a kind of common humanity. The fact is that we all suffer, as well as having beautiful, delicious, wonderful things in our lives. But everybody also experiences suffering and loss and aging and sickness and things like that, don't they? Don't you? Don't we? *Moi aussi.* And we also survive. We have a kind of courage and ability that we share as human beings to go through what's beautiful and what's difficult. That's our journey. And it's not a mistake. You're not bad because you suffer. You didn't do something wrong. You just took the ticket for the human incarnation ride at Disneyland, and it says: beautiful joy and great suffering. You want one? Well, okay, you got a body. Here you are. That's how it works.

So you start to see the commonality of this. And the transformation of our life then comes from our ability to be present for it as it is, which is what meditation teaches us —that phrase of Suzuki Roshi's, the marrow of meditation. Because it's not about some particular state; it's the capacity to be present for life with loving awareness for what it is.

This is from William Butler Yeats, who says: "We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather around us so that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life because of our quiet."

It's an amazing passage. Yeats was an extraordinary poet. He's saying that if we can be present—and you know it when people are really in the midst of suffering, or when you have the privilege of being with somebody who's dying—you can't fix that one. If they're dying, you can't change it. But if you can be present for it, the stillness and presence you have allows what needs to happen: the last words that haven't been spoken, the feelings that need to be felt in that circumstance or in other ones. Because you're actually there for it. You're not trying to fix it or change it. You're actually present.

And that's part of the gift of equanimity. It untangles, it cleanses, it purifies, it brings a certain balance. And even in a moment, it can change everything.

There you are, should it happen, in an argument with your lover or your spouse or your partner—if you have one, and if you don't, you'll find someone else to argue with, it's okay. And then there's a little voice in the back that says, "We're really in it, aren't we?" You know that voice? "God, we really got into it this time." And that little voice says, "Hmm, pretty interesting. We're in the drama now. We're really in it." And even that little voice, that moment—it's like a pause that says, well, this is part of our human life, but it's not all of who we are. It's just part of what we do. We also get in conflict sometimes. And then there's a breath that comes. You take a bigger breath and you say, "Yeah, are you okay in this? Here we are having a conflict. Is it all right?"

Conflict isn't a bad thing, you know. We have different desires and needs. It depends how we handle it, unfortunately.

Many of you saw her in her sparkly pink dress with the flowers on it. She'd come for a baby blessing five years ago, and now I get to see her dancing around. I asked her if she was in school, and she said, "Yes, I am in kindergarten." She really wanted me to know the particulars.

In kindergarten and preschool, if kids start hitting each other with blocks—which they do—the teacher will say something very simple like, "Use your words." Couldn't we do that on a national level? An international level? As a species, it's not that complicated.

So there's something in us that knows it's possible to step back and say, "Well, we're really caught in it," and that we don't have to be so caught in it. In some moment we can say, "Ah, yes." And we can begin to trust that. Trust not so much your plans and ideals and goals and things to figure out, because—and I love the work of Byron Katie, some of you may know her—she invites people to question their thoughts. Whatever view or story you have, first of all, there's another story about it. It's one perspective. But she'll say, "What if that thought weren't true? How would it be for you? How's it working for you to keep attached to that thought?" Or even more, "What if its opposite were true?" You think, how could that ever be? But we have ideas about things and yet they may turn out somewhat differently than we imagine. So holding them lightly is actually a really good thing. In Zen they say today's satori is tomorrow's mistake. You have a great revelation, but then how about the next day?

Equanimity is an invitation, somehow, again, to a place of trust in something much larger. There's a passage that I love, one I think is important in our national and cultural conversation. It comes from Mothering Magazine, from Peggy O'Mara, the editor. She writes:

"We have a cultural bias against dependency, against any emotion or behavior that indicates weakness. This is tragically evident in the way we push our children. We establish standards more important than their inner experiences. When we wean our children, rather than trusting they'll wean themselves. When we insist that they sit at the table and finish their meals, rather than trusting they will eat well if healthful food is provided. When we toilet train them at an early age, rather than trusting they will learn to use the toilet and not be wearing diapers in high school. It is the nature of the child to be dependent, and it is the nature of dependence to be outgrown. Dependence, insecurity, and weakness are natural states for a child, for all of us. But just as we grow from crawling to walking, babbling to talking, puberty to sexuality, from weakness to

strength, uncertainty to mastery, begrudging dependency because it's not independence is like begrudging winter because it's not yet spring. Dependency blossoms into independence in its own sweet time."

That's a wisdom for child rearing, but it's a deeper wisdom as well. If we live in a cowboy culture—"I'm completely independent, I can take care of myself"—you're not. You're vulnerable every time you drive down the street, trusting that other people stay on the right side. Every time you go through a traffic light, trusting that people stop at the red and let you go through the green. You're vulnerable every time you use money, trusting that people will believe that little piece of paper is actually worth something. That's an agreement.

And as we sit here and breathe and relax and open, this amazing thing happens: our body breathes. The breath we take was breathed by the other people in the room, for sure. And by the deer on the hillside. I saw a badger here once—it was really great. And coyotes and mountain lions. But that breath also comes across the Pacific. It dusted Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea. It dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor.

It did. You know, we are in it together. And so the whole idea that you're independent is a fiction. You are life expressing itself in a particular form. And life apparently approves of you, because you're still here, right? And all your ancestors, who are survivors, are kind of at your back rooting you on. They say, "Yep, you can do it. We did it. We went through all this, and you can do this as well."

And when we stop, even for a moment—when we meditate, when we take a walk in the hills, when we quiet ourselves—we can sense that there's a vast stillness that we long for amidst the clamor of the culture. A huge silence which contains everything: the turning of the stars and the seasons, birth and death, the joy and sorrow of people around us, the mystery of life. It's not far away. It's here in any minute, in any moment.

And equanimity is an invitation in the yogic tradition. It's the opening of the crown chakra, where you sit and the crown chakra opens and you feel the turning of the seasons and the stars with each breath.

This is another Buddhist text where the Buddha is speaking:

I consider the position of kings and rulers as that of dust motes in a sunbeam. I see the greatest treasures of gold and gems as but broken tiles. I look upon the finest silken robes as tattered rags. I see the myriad worlds of the universe as small seeds, and the great Indian ocean as drops of mud that soil one's feet. I perceive the teachings of the world to be the illusions of magicians, and look upon the judgment of right and wrong as the serpentine dance of dragons, and the rise and fall of beliefs as traces left by the four seasons.

It's poetic. It's beautiful poetry—traces left by the four seasons, the serpentine dance. There's a stillness in you that is beckoning you, that is saying, "Yes, you can live from this place." And meditation and spiritual life really is a reminder of this: that all these things are turning. Civilizations—the Sumerian and the Hittites, the Ottoman Empire. Remember the British Empire? When I was young, that was a big empire, but you know, easy come, easy go, or whatever. The Portuguese Empire. The Chinese empires. Empires—the Mayan and the Aztec and the Incan. But who are we? If we grasp and hold on, then it's like rope burn. It's changing and you're trying to hold on to it.

But with loving awareness, which is what you are, you're really the witness of it all. When you get quiet, then you come back to rest in the silent mind, which we could call loving awareness—the awareness of this dance. Just as you can step out of a conflict and say, "I'm caught in that," there's a place of stillness in us that's outside of time.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

This body is not me. I'm not limited to this body. I'm life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again soon. We will meet today and again tomorrow, in every moment. For we are life meeting itself.

He's a pretty deep cat. And he's pointing to a truth and a reality that who you are is spirit. You're not this body—I mean, I hope not anyway. Kale and Big Macs, or whatever it is, that's just not who you are. And you're not your feelings, because they're always changing. And God knows you're not your thoughts, because they contradict one another. As Whitman says, "Yeah, I am large, I contain multitudes."

So what are you? Spirit was born into this body consciousness, and it will leave in that mysterious moment of death. You are awareness itself. You are loving awareness that's having this human experience.

And to meditate isn't to have some particular experience—"Okay, now I've got it and I'm quiet and I've had some great insight." Those come. But it's really to remember who you are, this vastness and spaciousness and stillness. And when you do, there comes a possibility of a kind of vast perspective and freedom.

Here's Mahatma Gandhi, who says, "I believe in the unity of all things. And therefore I believe that if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent. And if one person gains, the whole world is uplifted by that." We each have our place to contribute. And then he goes on: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth

and love has always won. Yes, there have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it. Always. In the end they always fall. Think of it always."

Like those plants—the squash and the beans in the little gardens in the refugee camp—life wants to renew itself. And we're asked to participate in this mystery, not from a place of contraction and fear. All that comes, okay, you can notice that with loving awareness. But from a place of a deeper care and a deeper trust.

When I came back from being with my beloved Trudy—we were traveling together in Kyoto and then Dharamsala—I came back to do some teaching in Washington, D.C. for a big conference of four thousand therapists, which they need in D.C. very badly right now. And the day after I did my keynote address was the day of the March for Our Lives. So I went out on Pennsylvania Avenue, because it matters to me. I've been out demonstrating in all kinds of ways, because they matter.

One of the things that was really striking—there seemed like three quarters of a million people out there, an extraordinary number, and then big marches elsewhere. And what was very moving was how civilized it felt, how composed and gracious people seemed. There were lots of little kids and certainly many, many young people and many generations, and it was very diverse. People were all gracious with one another. It was like the world we want to live in. And the cops were all smiling. First of all, they don't really want us all to have guns—they have a certain perspective on that. But also, they were appreciating the civility of it.

At the same time, with that civility, there was a passion. It was very interesting, because the young people who spoke, those who were on the big screens right in front of the Capitol building—there was this wonderful Black gospel singer who did "The Times They Are a-Changin'" from Bob Dylan in a whole new way that I'd never heard. It was fabulous.

But then here's a poem by Alison Luterman, an Oakland poet, one of my favorites. She writes:

"I see her on TV screaming into a microphone. Her head is shaved and she is beautiful and seventeen and her high school was just shot up and she had to walk by friends lying in their own blood, her teacher bleeding out. And she's my daughter, the one I never had. And she's your daughter and everyone's daughter. And she's her own woman in the fullness of her young fire, calling bullshit on politicians who take money from the gun makers. Tears rain down her face, but she doesn't stop speaking. She doesn't apologize. She keeps calling them out. All of them, all of us who didn't do

enough to stop this thing. And you can see the gray faces of those who've always held power contort, utterly baffled to face this new breed of young woman—not silky, not compliant, not caring if they call her a ten or a troll. And she cries, but she doesn't stop speaking truth into the microphone, though her voice is raw and shaking and the sun is molten brass. And I'm three thousand miles away thinking how Neruda said, the blood of the children ran through the streets without fuss. Only now she is, they are raising a fuss, shouting down the walls of Jericho, and it's not that we road-weary elders have been given the all-clear exactly, but our shoulders do let down a little. We breathe from a deeper place. We say to each other, well, it looks like the baton may be passing to these next runners."

And they are fleet as thought and fiery as stars. And we take another breath and say to each other, the baton has been passed. And we set off then running hard behind them.

It's hard to read without weeping. And I love the end of it, because it's not that they're doing it alone—we're behind them also. We have to be. We have to hold the space so that those who are young and full of that passion and fire can feel supported by us. It's not separate.

Equanimity doesn't mean that one with a peaceful heart can't act in the world. You can act, but in a very different way. That civility of those three quarters of a million people still had courage and strength in it.

Now, the equanimity practice we did, which invited you to invoke or open to that quality of a peaceful heart, to rest at ease amidst the turning of all things, to be open and balanced and peaceful—this practice had a little phrase at the end. When you pictured another person, you said: "Your happiness and suffering depend on your own heart, on your own thoughts and actions, and not my wishes for you."

This is a tough part of equanimity. But it's taught as a practice, as a balance for loving-kindness and compassion practice. Because if you only do compassion and loving-kindness, it can accidentally fall into a kind of attachment—"I need a certain result" or "I want you to change or be a certain way." When you love someone or something and you want it to be a certain way, you can get really attached. You could call this the ancient wise response to codependence in relationship.

Because basically you can love people and care for them and support them, but you can't love *for* them. You can't change for them. You can't let go for them. And so there's something in that moment where you see this loved one and wish them a peaceful

heart, and then you say: "May you have a peaceful heart. May you be filled with love. I care for you. And your happiness and suffering depend on your heart, your thoughts and actions, and not my wishes for you."

I remember teaching this practice. I had the honor of leading a group at Alice Walker's home for about ten years. It was a group for women of color, and they sort of adopted me somehow. I felt very fortunate. I was nervous when I taught it the first time because I thought they might consider it to be a kind of cold Buddhist detachment thing—which it isn't. It's really an invitation to liberation. But I taught it anyway and asked, "So how was this?" They were smiling. It was a group of quite accomplished women—a professor at Berkeley, someone who ran an HIV/AIDS project, Alice who is a Pulitzer Prize winning author, and so forth.

They said, "In our community, especially in the communities of people of color, when we're accomplished in some way, people want a lot from us. Come and help my nonprofit. Write something for my book. I need money for my nephew or niece who's in trouble. We get this all the time, and we do what we can. But at some point we also need to be able to say: your happiness and suffering are in your hands and in your heart. We can love you, we can do what we can, but they depend on your own state of heart and mind, your own thoughts and actions, and not our wishes for you."

It was actually quite liberating. Does that make sense to you? It's not meant as uncaring. It's meant as a disentanglement from the ideas we have for other people—just in case you have those kinds of ideas about other people.

We all live through the same enormous changes of circumstance, of gain and loss, pleasure and pain. And then you get that phone call. Surprise. I think of this friend who is a hospice nurse. She took care of so many people. And then she got the call from the doctor saying, "Your biopsy doesn't look good." She said, "It was so different taking care of all those other people. But when I got the call—wait a second, it's *moi*," as Miss Piggy would say. "It's *me*." Such a surprise. And she became, of course, scared in some ways, but also tremendously tender. "Oh yes, this is what it's like to go through this."

Of course we could complain. The world is unjust, and we need to work for justice. And still humanity is... well, what did Gandhi say when asked about Western civilization? "It would be a good idea." Something like that.

But I remember the poetry in the Book of Job, where Job was complaining. And he had fair reason to complain, all those things that happened to him.

But then there's this voice out of the whirlwind, which is really out of the whirlwind of creativity of life itself. "Where were you when I clothed the sky, when I placed the suns in their orbits? Were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth, when I set the morning stars to sing together in the sky, when I set the sea with doors to hold it as it gushed forth out of the womb, when I swaddled the earth in clouds? Do you know the seasons of the wild ass as she brings forth her young, and the days the falcon learns to fly?"

It's really a poem about mystery—that we don't know so much, really. There's something about creation itself that we are a part of, but it's not meant to be just figured out in our heads, how it's supposed to be. Instead, it becomes possible to meet it and to care for it with a peaceful heart, to live in that way. And that's the real miracle.

Yes, stand up for justice. Yes, plant seeds, plant sequoias that take two thousand years to grow. Yes, make a conscious business and raise conscious children, beautiful children. Do all these things. But how do we do it? We have a choice.

I remember the story of a couple who were unable to conceive and decided to adopt a child. They decided they would go where there were children who were either orphaned or really needed parents. So they went to India, found this very little child, adopted him, and brought him back. After a year or two, they discovered that he had cerebral palsy and also that he was profoundly deaf. So they started to take care of him physically, and they started to teach him sign language. Then they got really worried about their little boy, about how lonely he would be with cerebral palsy and being deaf.

So they went back to India. Most of us would say, "Oh my God, I adopted this child and now look—this little boy is sick with cerebral palsy and he can't hear. What a tragedy." But they went back to India and they said, "Do you have any other kids with cerebral palsy who are deaf? Our boy needs friends." And they adopted a second child with the same challenges. "We got one, we need two of them to keep each other company."

You will have difficulties. Anybody in this room have difficulties? You will. You also have a good heart. You have all kinds of possibilities when you get quiet. When you look, you can do magnificent things in the smallest way, and it plants incredible seeds in this world.

Think about where in your life needs grace, needs letting go, needs a more spacious heart. And what is it that supports this in your life? It could be reading a poem, or sitting in meditation, or taking a walk in the hills—something that brings you back to a

place of peace. Or your best friends who remind you, who give you a bigger perspective. Or just taking a long hot bath, listening to music. You know what brings your heart back to peace and gives you a big perspective.

Human life is not without its sorrow. And yet in the midst of all, there is a reality of presence, of consciousness itself that's open and vast and inviting. It allows you to walk through this world with a peaceful heart, with understanding. All the wise people of the ages, the people we care about and celebrate in some way—yes, they may have done amazing things, but the wise ones also did it from a place of understanding, a place of graciousness, a peaceful heart.

There's an interesting experience that happens to people sometimes in very wonderful or deep meditation sessions. It's one of the dozen or twenty flavors of awakening or enlightenment that can happen—maybe I'll talk about those flavors some night soon. It's the experience of perfection. I'm wary of saying it, very careful, because I don't mean the war in Syria is perfection, and I don't mean hungry children and starving people are perfection in the ordinary sense.

And I think we have to do whatever we can to care for one another and to reach out and tend this world and to knit together the parts that have torn.

But there's another reality that's also true—and that is to see the mysterious perfection of it all. To recognize that somehow there couldn't be birth without death, there couldn't be gain without loss, there couldn't be night without day, there couldn't be joy without sorrow and sweet without sour. It's actually how it's woven together. This is duality. It's human incarnation.

In this perspective, as the mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." She had a revelation that was filled with love, really—filled with love for the whole world, for all its beauty and all its sorrows together, if that makes sense to you. And again, I want to be very careful in talking about this, because it doesn't mean that one doesn't tend and care. But it's the invitation to rest in that which is sacred. And then every place you are is the holy land. Every body is the body of the Buddha in different forms.

When the Buddha was lying between the two sal trees, as the story is told, on his last day—surrounded by the villagers and monks and princes and nuns and all the people who were there—the very last thing attributed to him was this: "This world is impermanent. Make of yourself a light." Be a lamp, be a light in this ever-changing world. And that's the invitation of this practice of peace and well-being and love—that we carry that. That's who we are, actually. And it's possible for us.

Perhaps the point is not to let the fears and the terror and the confusion that's there out in the news and in the world colonize your heart, not let it take you over. The world actually needs people whose hearts are at peace, who can see with clarity and tend to it with a kind of beauty that is given to you and given to each of us. And if anything tonight resonated with you or reminded you, then that becomes something that you already had, something you can carry as you go.

CHAPTER 14

Mindful Loving Awareness - Part 1 - The Three Gates to Freedom

Jack Kornfield · 1h05

> *In this profound teaching, Jack Kornfield illuminates how mindfulness and loving awareness serve as both the gateway and destination of spiritual practice. Drawing from the Therīgāthā (freedom songs of the earliest Buddhist nuns), T.S. Eliot, and his own training with Ajahn Chah in the Thai forest tradition, Kornfield presents three interconnected dimensions of freedom available through practice.*
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> *The first dimension involves expanding our capacity to be present with the full range of human experience—joy, sorrow, fear, longing, boredom, and grief—without resistance or escape. Rather than perfecting ourselves, we perfect our love and compassion for humanity itself. The second dimension reveals the process of experience: seeing anicca (impermanence), dukkha (the unreliable nature of conditioned existence), and the emptiness of all phenomena. This understanding brings the "tears of the way"—a recognition of our common humanity that fosters deep forgiveness and tenderness.*
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> *The third dimension points to consciousness itself, what Ajahn Chah called becoming "the one who knows" (Pāli: sati-bhūto). Kornfield guides practitioners to recognize that awareness exists outside of time, unlimited by the aging body or changing circumstances. When identity shifts from the content of experience to awareness itself, fear naturally diminishes and we fall in love with the world. This love then moves us to tend the earth with what Zen calls "bliss-bestowing hands"—engaged action arising from wisdom and joy rather than reactivity.*

So this evening, I'd like to talk about mindfulness or loving awareness as both a gateway and the destination. And to talk about the dimensions of it in a way that I hope is helpful for you who practice and in your practice.

Speaking of gateway, it's important to say that these teachings and Spirit Rock and the community welcomes you all. Whatever particular body you were born into, whatever your class or sexual orientation or whatever your gender identity or whatever your race, whatever your political point of view, whatever background you have, the gates of the Dharma are open and inviting to say: here are practices and understandings, may they serve you.

So as you listen to this teaching, you can do it as a kind of meditation in itself, as a reflection. It's meant to empower, to encourage, to remind you of what's possible in your own heart and mind and what really matters in some way.

In saying that mindfulness is both the gateway and the destination, there's so much teaching of mindfulness out there in the broader world now—in education and business and healthcare, for purposes of reducing stress or becoming more productive or all kinds of other things which have great value. But there's also something that it leads to that is deeper than those. T.S. Eliot's famous lines in the Four Quartets: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all your exploring will be to arrive where you started and know the place for the first time."

And so the invitation of mindfulness and loving awareness is really to be alive and present here on this earth, in this life, in a wakeful and honorable and beautiful way that is given to us as human beings. This is your gateway to freedom. It's a birthright of all human beings, this capacity to be aware.

Now, mindfulness has two aspects to it, like breathing in and breathing out. There's a quality of mindful presence, of becoming really present to life itself. And then there is mindful response. You breathe in, mindful presence, sit quietly. And then you respond to the world, mindful response. Tonight I'm going to focus more on mindful presence; later on mindful response and relationship to the community around us and to the collective that we're woven into.

There are three dimensions of the freedom that this gateway of mindfulness offers, or loving awareness. Not to gain, but to find just where you are, wherever your life is, whatever your family, community, work situation, living situation.

I have these verses from the Therīgāthā, which are the freedom songs of the earliest Buddhist nuns. It's a new, beautiful translation. Here's one from a woman named Amadina. She says: "For so long, I thought only of the river's end. Then one morning I set my paddle down to watch the sunrise over the eastern hills, only to find myself floating somehow gently upstream. I promise, it's not what I expected."

We're so busy paddling, and finally she set her paddle down. What she was looking for wasn't at the end of something, it turns out, but where she was, where you are, here and now.

So the first dimension of freedom isn't about gaining something. In fact, the goal of meditation isn't to gain something, but rather to come into a different relationship with this life that we've been given.

The first dimension of mindfulness or loving awareness that offers you a deeper freedom is the capacity to be mindful of experience, of the content of your experience. It's very practical because as you meditate and undertake the training of mindfulness, you gradually learn to trust in your capacity to be present and to tolerate your human incarnation. And that's not an easy thing. Take a look at it—there's a lot of things that are hard to tolerate.

Here's a poem from my dear friend Jane Hirshfield called "Fado": "With a sleight of hand, a man reaches close and lifts a quarter from inside a girl's ear, and from her hands he takes a dove she didn't know was there. Which amazes more, you wonder—the quarter's serrated murmur against the thumb, the dove's seduced silence, that they magically appeared, or that in Portugal, this same half-stop moment, it's almost dawn, and a woman in a wheelchair is singing a fado that puts every life in the room on one pan of a scale and itself on the other, and the copper bowls balance."

If you've heard Fado, the kind of depth of it that comes in that song and that sound—it's as if it's all of humanity being given through one voice.

So here we are, we have this human incarnation that we have to figure out what to do with. Mindfulness allows you to do what neuroscientists call expanding your window of tolerance. You sit in meditation thinking, "I'm going to get calm and reduce my stress and be happy." And what happens? You get a little bit quiet. And some of you just not often go to sleep—I notice that. You need some rest; I'm aware of that.

But then when you're not sleeping, what comes up? Anxiety. Your personal anxiety, the collective anxiety, the political anxiety, the environmental anxiety. You know all of those anxieties, right? The unfinished business of your heart. The grief that you haven't let yourself weep. The rage that may be there for the injustices of the world or what's touched you with injustice. The unexpressed love and creativity. Or maybe it's just your boredom or disappointment or restlessness or loneliness.

As the great poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few divine ingredients can."

So the point when you sit, if you get bored or restless, if the tears come and you grieve, if anger comes or longing—the point isn't to get rid of it. It's actually to begin to tolerate it with loving awareness and say, "This is part of being a human being." Because otherwise, guess what? The minute you get bored or lonely, what do you do? Open the refrigerator or go online or whatever your favorite way to put yourself to sleep is, because you can't tolerate being with yourself.

And so the first great gift of freedom is to allow yourself to learn how to sit with loving awareness for your full humanity. That means you'll sit and at times your body will hurt, and you have to hold that pain with kindness the way you would hold a crying child. Not the pain that you could simply move away from. People say, "Well, why should I sit with pain?" Because someday you're going to have pain that you can't move away from. Or you'll be sitting with someone who's in the hospital, holding their hand, and they're going to be in pain. If you don't know how to be with it, you're going to freak out. But if you learn how to be with joy and sorrow, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, this brings an immense freedom to you.

And then you have to be with all your desires. "I want this and I don't want that." You know your desires, the desiring mind. Julia Child writes, "In department stores, so much unnecessary kitchen equipment is bought indiscriminately by people who just came in for men's underwear." The desiring mind can pick you up and take you to the mall or Las Vegas. It can get you married. It can also get you divorced. It can do anything. But to be able to sit and say, "Ah, this is desire. This is longing. This is boredom, loneliness. This is fear. This is love"—you begin to discover that the heart is big enough to hold it all. And that you can trust this. This is an enormous freedom to have.

Now, these simple, skillful means that we teach on retreats and in classes are to be able to bow to what arises inwardly, to name it gently. "This is sadness. This is longing. This is joy. This is love. This is fear. This is hate." To acknowledge it and to get curious. What does this energy actually feel like if I let myself experience it?

And then, here's another little move: to invite it to open and say, "All right, show me—whether it's longing or love or boredom or fear—show me the whole nine yards, the whole megillah, whatever language you want to use. Display yourself. Let me see it." Because most of the trouble with what you experience in meditation when you get in trouble is your resistance to the experience. It gets worse and worse and worse. And then it stays more. But when you say, "All right, let me just experience this"—

"Oh, I'm so restless. I feel like I could die." All right? I'll be the first person at Spirit Rock to die of restlessness this spring. Take me. Kill me. Restless, restless. Name it restless. Dying, dying, dying, dying. And then you'll notice a little thought comes: "I wonder if I should go out for a little snack after the class." Because the mind has no pride, right?

And you begin to realize that you can be aware—as we did in that first meditation—of being the sky of mind. You discover that you can allow experience, that the heart is big enough and the mind spacious enough to do this. So you name it, you acknowledge it, you let it open, you feel it as an energy.

And then something very interesting happens. Even though you become spacious, it also brings a kind of intimacy with life. Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, says, "Of what avail is it if we can go to the moon if we can't cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?" There's something tremendously intimate about loving awareness. It's a willingness to be present for all of the feelings and thoughts and experiences that make up our humanity, and to be able to be with them.

Now I'm talking about this in this sort of nice, glib way—you can do this. It's not that easy. In my own practice, when I sit, generally I can become very spacious, a kind of vastness. But I also live a very complicated and speedy life, and I tend to be a speedy person by nature, somewhat impatient. So yes, there's vastness, and sometimes I'll bring in loving-kindness, metta. But sometimes I'm just impatient or frustrated. Sometimes it gets harder than that.

I think, for example, about when I went through a very painful divorce seven years ago or so—which I didn't want to go through, as one doesn't. I'm generally a quite loyal person, and I thought I would be married for the rest of my life. But it didn't happen that way, and there was a lot of grief and agony and anguish. It was really painful. I would hold it with compassion.

I remembered when I was training in the forest monasteries and I got sick with malaria. I was lying there, kind of out of my mind, sweating with fever, and my teacher came to visit. He later brought some medicines. He said, "Sick, huh?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Makes you want to go home to your mother, doesn't it?" "Yeah." He said, "Okay, we've all been there. You can do this. I'll give you some medicine, which will help, but you can do it." And because he had done it, he kind of exemplified the capacity that we have.

So there I am when it's really hard. And sometimes I couldn't do it. Sometimes it was too painful. I was too sad. I'd get up. But then I made this practice, which I have now: I won't get up for three times if something's really difficult. Okay, I have to get up. It's too hard, too caught in it. Okay, that's one time. Now let me sit a little bit longer. Compassion, vastness. Yeah, but this is too painful. Okay, that's twice.

An interesting thing happens. On the third time, I let myself get up. It's not like you're supposed to torture yourself. But an interesting thing happens: as you push the envelope of your capacity to be present, to tolerate all of your humanity, your presence deepens and the loving awareness gets stronger. Even in two minutes of saying, "I can't do this, but I'll do it a couple more minutes until the next wave comes when I've got to get up"—in those two minutes, you feel stronger and deeper. "Oh, I did that." Yeah, but now you're going to get up. Well, let's try that again.

What you discover is that it's a process—a really trustworthy process—of letting yourself find a way to open to your full humanity. And each dimension of it gives you a kind of freedom.

Here, from a woman I worked with on retreat who was facing the demon of her own inner struggle with binge eating. She said, "I believed that food had an unparalleled capacity to bring satisfaction and free me from suffering."

Time and again, I've reached for the food, looking for it to do its magic, only to have it turn on me, fail me, bring me untold physical and emotional suffering and shame. I became hypercritical of myself, my situation. I despaired.

Freedom has come as I've become more mindful of my own body and the intense discomfort I was trying to escape from. I started to find that I could recover more quickly and less painfully from bouts of compulsive binging if I could stay even a little bit kind to my body and present with my pain. Instead of eating more just to try and avoid the effects of having eaten too much and the remorse of having done it again, I could actually watch myself start down that sad old path, and as the loving awareness grew, I realized, "Oh, I don't have to do this," and self-compassion would come in. I'm deeply grateful for the compassion that has rescued me from the realm of the hungry ghosts.

It's poignant and painful, and it also has tremendous courage in it—a testament to what's possible.

There comes a kind of fearlessness as you practice. And this is a really important thing to say: fearlessness doesn't mean that you won't be afraid.

I remember going with my teacher, Ajahn Chah. We were invited to a monastery on the Cambodian border, a new little forest temple. We got a ride in this guy's pickup truck. He was a young guy who was driving really fast on a one-and-a-half-lane dirt road through the mountains. Mostly it was fine, but once in a while there'd be a big bus or a logging truck or a water buffalo in the middle of the road, and you couldn't see it around the curve. He was speeding, and we asked him to slow down, but he was young and he didn't and wouldn't.

I started to hold on really tight, thinking, "Okay, I'm going to die as a monk. What will my mother think?" And then I looked over and saw that Ajahn Chah's knuckles were white too. That somehow reassured me a little bit.

Finally we made it. We got there. We didn't die. We pulled into the compound of this place, and Ajahn Chah smiled. He wasn't afraid of dying—he knew that, he showed that in many ways. He looked at me and said, "Scary ride, wasn't it?" And it's just what it was. It's not like you pretend there isn't fear. But even fear becomes simply, "Oh, this is what fear is like. Fear is like this."

As this capacity for loving awareness grows—our trust and ability to be present for life—it not only affects us but affects those around us. You know how it is when you're with somebody who's able to be present in a difficult situation or in a conflict, how helpful that is.

And if you want to change the world that really needs it, the human world, you know that has to start with a change of heart, a change of mind. W. H. Auden, the poet, wrote about loving your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart. It's got to start somewhere, and it starts in here.

James Baldwin wrote, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hate and fear so stubbornly is they sense that once hate is gone, they'll be forced to deal with their own pain." A really powerful thing. Once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain.

When we can't bear insecurity—anybody in this room have perfect security? Please raise your hand. Financial security, total? Physical security? It's just not what incarnation offers. When you can't deal with it, you project it out because it's scary and you can't hold it. And so you blame your insecurity on others—the Muslims or the gays or the immigrants or black people or brown people. Or communists. They were the old one. Remember them?

They're coming back around, actually. It's like the enemy du jour. But it's actually because, as a society, we can't tolerate our vulnerability.

And yet, as the poet Rilke says, ultimately it's upon your vulnerability that you depend. Because we're vulnerable to each other. Every time you drive down the street, you're vulnerable to the people stopping at red lights so you can go through the green. Or to the farmers and the woman with the bandana who picks the strawberries, and the people who spray the pesticide on your food that gets washed off. We're in it together. And every breath you take dusts the top of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it comes over the Pacific, but it also dusts the Fukushima nuclear reactor. It's us.

And so when we can hold this with compassion, we become a different force in the world—one that doesn't project our fear onto others, but understands that this is our human lot, and that we can do this in a beautiful and wise way.

There's been a lot of publicity recently about the National Memorial for Peace and Justice that just opened in Montgomery, Alabama, started in part by Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative. Hopefully many of you have at least seen the photos, because it's extremely moving. There are those long wooden columns under the roof, one for each county in America where terrorism was committed against Black people, with the names of those who were lynched—women, children, men, teenagers. It's a little bit like the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. It says we need to be able to see this and tolerate the shame and the pain and the suffering of it if we're to live in a different way.

And your practice of mindfulness is that which allows you to live with your true humanity—to be in the presence of the unbearable beauty of life and the ocean of tears. It's the gateway to your freedom, and not just your own, but to our collective freedom.

Now, the second dimension of mindfulness or loving awareness—besides being able to be aware of, to hold with compassion, to tolerate the range of human experience. Because as Auden points out, it's not just the crooked neighbor. There isn't anybody who doesn't have, because we live in cultures of it, their own prejudice. I do. Our own racism, our own fears, our own hatred that we tolerate. And when we can tolerate it, we can actually examine it instead of being lost in it.

So you start to realize the point isn't so much to perfect yourself—"Okay, I'm going to be this perfect person." It's to perfect your love, to perfect your compassion for humanity itself, yourself included.

The second dimension of freedom that comes through mindfulness and loving awareness is not mindfulness of the content of experience, but noticing the process of experience. And again, this is tremendously practical, because in the midst of drama—now I know you don't have drama, but some people do, right?—in the midst of loss, of being triggered, in the midst of fear or difficulty, or even of new possibilities, there's another way of relating than being closed down or reactive.

I remember the Ojibwe people saying, "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." There is another perspective.

Loving awareness not only sees the content of experience and holds it with compassion, but it also illuminates the nature of life. As you pay attention, you notice that wherever you pay attention, everything is in change. Everything is changing. It's impermanent. The Pali word is *dukkha*. It has some problems built into it, which I'll explain—it encompasses suffering and loss and so forth, whatever you look at. And everything is also empty. These things need a little unpacking, so I'll try to do that.

In the Buddhist stories, the Buddha was wandering with various followers and came to the bank of the Ganges River. He said, "See the bubbles that float along the bank of the Ganges River?" They said, "Yes, we do." He said, "Examine them. If you examine them closely, you'll see that they appear, but that they're fundamentally empty—there's no substance to them, and after time they disappear." They said, "We see that." He said, "In the same way, examine your thoughts and your opinions. Examine your emotions. Examine the sensations in your body, the views and perspectives you have about life." And they too, as we practiced in the first meditation, arise for a time and then vanish.

The more quiet you get, the more you start to see that kind of emptiness—that things don't last and they're insubstantial.

Let me put it in some other languages.

It was a good time here in San Francisco. I was here for that. Summer of love. And it's gone. So are the nineties. In fact, remember Y2K? That one's gone too. Remember 2017? Where are they? They're back with the pharaohs, and they're back with Genghis Khan, and they're back with Lao Tzu, and they're back with the dinosaurs. They disappeared back to where everything goes to.

Where is that? Things appear in the reality of the present, and then they vanish like bubbles. Where is the year 2000? Where is last week? Where is your childhood? Gone, right? And we feel things to be solid, but when you get quiet, they really are not. They don't last. And therefore, you can't hold on to them. I mean, you can try holding on, but then what you get is rope burn.

So things are impermanent. This is part of what you start to see. And your wisdom grows. Oh yeah, it's all in change. That's the reality of it. And then you can't hold on to it, really.

And then you see dukkha. Dukkha is a complex word that means unreliable, pain, loss, aging, sickness, death. Again, that life has both the unbearable beauty of the world and the ocean of tears. This is what human incarnation is made of. Even the most beautiful experiences we have as human beings don't last. And not only that—you're in the middle of that beautiful experience, the best wine and the most beautiful music, the greatest lovemaking, and then that little thought comes in: "Gosh, I hope we can do this again." Because you know it's going to end.

Built into incarnation is the fact that everything dissolves. And what does it mean to be alive and wise and loving in a world where this is true? This is the way that it is.

Loving awareness or mindfulness allows us to see this and to see that we're all in it together. Because what comes with this is a sense of our common humanity. There you are aging—you may have noticed that. Or you're going through financial loss or divorce, or someone you love has died, or even worse. People come and talk to me and one of their children has died, which is kind of the most unbearable of pains.

There's a poem in these beautiful songs I started to read from, written by a nun whose daughter Jiva died. When she was meditating, all of a sudden she was weeping, and she began to realize how many other mothers had daughters named Jiva, and that a certain number of them too had died. Then all of a sudden she realized it wasn't just those mothers in India—she was in the middle kingdom of India at that time—but she realized, "Oh, I am part of all mothers. Sometimes we give birth and they live, and sometimes we give birth and they die." She realized it wasn't personal to her, even though it was tragic and personal. There was something greater that she was a part of.

That's true in financial loss or divorce or whatever we want to talk about. There comes a different kind of tears—not just the tears of grief that we have to grieve for some change or loss that's very important, but what are called the tears of the way. They're the dharma tears that say, "Oh yeah, this is what it's like to be a human being on this earth—to have birth and beauty and creation and celebration, and also to have loss and death and illness." This is what's given to us.

As we open to this reality—that it's not us, that we didn't make a mistake, that we're not suffering because we did something wrong—that's not what dukkha means.

Suffering isn't because you were bad or did something wrong. It's because you're a human being. And human life has joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss, birth and death, sweet and sour. It's woven together with these opposites. And it can't not be. How could you have day without night? How could you have birth without death?

What happens as the sense of common humanity grows, when we see that it's all impermanent and ungraspable in some way, is that the heart becomes tender and wise—the tears of the way—and one becomes very forgiving.

This is William Butler Yeats: "I'm content to follow to source every event and action and thought his whole life, measure the lot, forgive myself the lot. When such as I cast out remorse, so great a sweetness flows in my breast, for we must laugh and we must sing, for we are blessed by everything and everything we look upon is blessed."

And there comes a tenderness that says, this is our life. Instead of the kind of struggle against the way things are, there grows a trust that, like our ancestors and the generations before, like the Miwoks who walked this beautiful land and left it for us, the generations turn and we're part of something so much bigger.

At the end of things, it's not always the end of the story. Today, 200,000 people died, give or take a few. And today, 250,000 people were born. Tomorrow, 200,000 more will die and 250,000 more will be born—every day. This is wild. This is us coming into being, having an earthly dance, and then leaving these bodies.

What's beautiful in understanding this—it's not tragic, it's actually equally magnificent—is that when something ends, something else is always born. And you can begin to trust this in the most beautiful way. You think you've come to the end of your road and that all the gates are closed, and you have to be quiet for a while and maybe feel your fear and your grief and wait to see what will come. And then, I promise you, something new will come. It always does.

I like to think about Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, both of whom received the Nobel Prize several years ago. They were leaders of Liberia in West Africa. Ellen said—because they'd been through so much pain and struggle and warfare in their country and around that part of West Africa—in celebrating her Nobel Prize, she said, "Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers, and now they remember our country for its women." Out of that suffering came something that had never happened before there.

So there's also a way that with our great hearts, with the loving awareness that grows, that we can trust and rest in, we know that whatever happens is not the end of the story—that something new is waiting to be born. That's how it is.

One hundred billion red cells are born in you each day. New red cells. One hundred billion. You're amazing. And 600,000 particles of skin leave your body every hour. That's why you need a vacuum, by the way. You get a new stomach lining every five days. New eyebrows every four months—those of you who don't pluck them anyway. And pretty much your liver replaces itself every six weeks. You too are being reborn and remade. This is not the same body you had back then. Oh, you know that—you just look in the mirror, you know that. You are part of something that is renewing itself. And this is part of our common humanity as well.

So you begin to find the freedom of tolerating experience, of being with the full range and content of your humanity. You start to see the principles, the laws of impermanence and emptiness and ungraspability. You start to realize what it means to see the whole process of life renewing itself. And there's a great freedom that comes. Whatever drama you're in—oh yes, this is part of the renewal.

And you begin to trust that.

And then finally, how do we hold this immensity? This third dimension of mindfulness is an awareness of consciousness itself. It's what we were doing in that meditation when we started this evening, and in a way why I began with that practice. And again, it's really practical. This is not talking about some kind of philosophy that you have to believe. You try it for yourself and see whether you can learn to be present. And when you are, what are things doing? What is the nature of your life?

So here's the next step. When my teacher Ajahn Chah was living as a forest monk, he practiced very ardently in caves and out in the forest with the tigers and elephants. He had lots of stories about that in the old days. And because he was an ardent meditator and quite devoted, at times he had great experiences. His body would fill with light and he would have visions and great insights and all those things.

For people who come here on retreat, we have an annual two-month retreat. And one of the honors I've had for twenty years of that was to sit with people each day and talk about what's happening in their practice. Amazing things happen sometimes. Your body does dissolve into light and rapture and all kinds of beautiful things. So Ajahn Chah had these great insights and experiences, and he thought, what do I do? I'm going to go see the most renowned master of his time, who was another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun, a forest master.

He went to see him and said, "I need to tell you about the last years of my practice and get some guidance." So he laid out all these things after he bowed and sat there quietly for a bit. And then Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Chah, you missed the point. Those are just experiences." He said, "They're like movies. You can go to movies and there's a romantic comedy and there's a documentary and there's a war movie and there's a drama—or a cartoon, animated, whatever it happens to be." He said, "Those are just movies that appear and disappear. And the point is, they're always changing. You can't get one of those movies to stay. The question is, to whom do they happen? What you have to do now is turn your attention from the movies, which you're able to be present for, back to ask: who is seeing this? Turn it back to consciousness itself, to awareness. And become"—the word in Pali is *sati buto*—"the one who knows, the witness to all things."

Turn your attention back. Ajahn Chah used this phrase: to become the knowing, or the one who knows. And in this very practical way, you step out of the drama of life and you start to witness it, as we did in that first meditation, from the place of loving awareness or consciousness itself that says, "Hmm, look what's happening now. This is this kind of drama. This is a war movie, or a conflict, or this is a love story," whatever it happens to be.

Another simple way to explain this—and we did that meditation, you can try it at home—look in the mirror. When you look in the mirror, you'll notice you've aged, right? It droops, it's wrinkly, it loses its fur in some places and grows new fur in other places. As my colleague Wes Nisker says, the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. It ages.

But the interesting thing is that when you look, you don't necessarily feel older, right? Everybody know that experience? That's because it's only your body that's getting old. When you look in the mirror and notice it drooping or aging, the consciousness that's seeing it is outside of time. The body exists in time—it's little and gets bigger and adult, and then it gets older, and then it dies. But the awareness itself is timeless. It says, "Hmm, let's see, how are we doing in this incarnation?" Seems to be like we're in the middle at best right now, sort of in the closing stages, or whatever. But consciousness is not limited by your body.

I know this because I've sat with people in coma where they're flatlined, where they say nothing's there. I was sitting with Marlene Jones, who was one of our wonderful teachers here, and she'd had heart failure. They didn't get to her in time—a long time passed before she got to the hospital. For a week there was no sign of anything. Brain dead, body hardly responding, no response to any kind of stimulus. So her daughter and family and I decided, alright, take her off the life support.

I was holding her hand and I said, "Marlene, you're leaving us too soon. I really loved you. We needed your support and help. You were so great." And then I added, "But the least you could do is give us a sign or something," thinking maybe afterward, whatever.

I said that, and two tears rolled down her cheeks. Nothing for a week, no response—and then that.

Who we are is not this physical body.

This is the reality of it. We identify with our body, we identify with our views and feelings and thoughts, but that's not the game. And as we begin to rest in loving awareness, there's a kind of shift of identity that's tremendously liberating.

Here from Thich Nhat Hanh, where he says: "This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I am life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again soon. We will meet today and again tomorrow. We will meet at the source of every moment, in all forms of life."

This is what—first of all, it's true. You can check it out yourself, but it happens to have the charm of being true. It's what got Thich Nhat Hanh through the horrors of the American Vietnam War, through all kinds of terrible things. How could he do this? Because he knew that he wasn't limited by this body and mind. And so he was able to impart that to others around him.

I was just in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama for these Mind and Life science teachings, and he was talking about his own practice. He said, "You know, if I go somewhere and I think I'm the Dalai Lama, it doesn't go so well." We're not the roles. We get to inhabit them, but that's not who you are. There's a coming home.

Here's one more way to talk about this mystery. We're really talking about the mystery of incarnation. Derek Amato, in his late twenties, dove off a diving board into a pool and hit his head on the bottom. It was the shallow end, and he had a horrible concussion. He lost part of his hearing and was rushed to the hospital. He wasn't paralyzed, fortunately, but when he came back, he had this odd impulse. He went to a friend's house who had a piano, sat down—he'd never been musical, never studied—and played this incredible piece of music.

It's now called acquired musical savant syndrome, because they don't know what the hell else to call it. From that moment, even though he'd never studied, he didn't just play—he could play Beethoven and Bach—but he was also composing. He was composing rock music, but he didn't compose it by writing it down. He just played it. There's a beautiful NPR show, and there are YouTubes of him. He's just astonished. He said, "I started to weep. What is this coming through me?"

But it's like Rumi the poet, or Mozart. Do you think Mozart composed that stuff? He heard it, and he wrote it down as fast as he could before it disappeared. Or Rumi—the Masnavi is an ocean of poems. Somebody was going around behind him, writing it down. He was listening to the music of the spheres, to the poem of the ages. A hundred thousand verses just poured through him.

Who do you think you are? Consciousness is not just that little thing. You are connected with it all. Personality is, I think Aldous Huxley called it a reducing valve, basically—so you can handle the dimensions of mystery and still remember your social security number.

So you are consciousness itself. You are all that is. This is your true nature. And when you can witness the world from that place, as we practiced in the beginning, the practicality of it is that it reduces fear. Fear arises, but oh, that's just fear. It reduces the grasping. You realize this is not the story of the world—your body or what you have. It's just not the deepest reality. And you live in a different and much freer dimension.

And then finally, as your identity shifts, it all comes back in a circle, because it's not like levels. These are actually all like a mandala, or dimensions.

We are complex beings, and these are dimensions of consciousness. In the Zen ox-herding pictures, you see at the end—after going and finding the ox and taming it, this whole beautiful Zen story—the tenth picture is this figure returning to town with what's called bliss-bestowing hands. "I carry my wine bottle in one hand, not afraid of anything, and I've got my staff in the other, and I go back and I offer blessings to everything that I touch."

There's something that happens when you become able to tolerate experience of all kinds, so that your heart grows wise and big and compassionate. When you see the nature of life—impermanent, empty, ungraspable, containing both the tears of the way and the beauty of the world—you realize that it's not that you're in the world. The world is in you. You are this consciousness in the world. This is what you are. It's having its way with you.

And you fall in love with the world. You fall in love with the sky and the grasses. You fall in love with all the weird people sitting around you. In spite of yourself and in spite of world history, you fall in love with it because it's magnificent. You fall in love with wood and carpets and bells, with light and dark, and you say, "Wow, what an amazing..." There comes awe. Mystery. You know Allen Ginsberg's coda to his great poem *Howl*, where he starts: "Holy, holy, holy, everything is holy."

And in the vastness—as said Nisargadatta, one of my Indian teachers—in the vastness of consciousness then, there's only one movement: the movement of love. Because it's all you. It's your life, but it's not your small life. You are life expressing itself. And you can enter and abide in this.

Then, with bliss-bestowing hands, you're able to tend the world, to reach out and mend it, to do what's necessary, but from a really different place. You bring a sense of joy or ease even to the great sufferings and difficulties.

I've told the story on other nights of being at the airport with my daughter for the demonstrations after that first January, a year ago, that presidential edict that forbade people coming to the U.S. from those seven predominantly Muslim countries. There were big demonstrations, and we went down together. She's an asylum lawyer, and she came down with a whole group of young lawyers who were trying to get asylum or save people whose lives were in danger from all around the world. There were more young lawyers there than there were people who needed lawyers, in fact. They put out a sign: "Anyone need immigration or legal help?"

Everybody had their signs, and they were shouting and chanting—the usual kind of archetypal demonstration. The best piece of it: we were at one gate with about four hundred people. The whole thing had a couple thousand people in it for a couple days. And in the middle of this one, as everyone's chanting, "No ban, no fear, refugees are welcome here," there was a New Orleans jazz band.

So people are chanting, and then the drummer kicks in with a nice riff. You get a little pulse behind it. Then the trumpet plays a beautiful riff on top, and the trombone comes in, and pretty soon everybody is chanting and singing at the same time. The whole "No Ban No Fear" turns into this New Orleans jazz piece. The security guards, the cops—everybody's smiling. Because it was an important demonstration and a statement, but you could feel the love in it. You could feel the joy in it. It wasn't against something. It was for life itself.

Molly Ivins, who was a really wonderful writer, a columnist, an activist—all kinds of other things—from Texas and the New York Times and all those kinds of dangerous places, she wrote: "So keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous. Rejoice in all the oddities freedom can produce. And when you get through celebrating the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who follow how much fun it was."

When this capacity for mindfulness grows, for loving awareness, and we can rest in it, there come both the tears of the way and the joy of participation in life—because it's ours and it's us.

I read a poem a month or two ago, but I want to read it as I close. When I came back from India about a month ago, I was in Washington, D.C., teaching. I got there just in time to go down to Pennsylvania Avenue to the big March for Our Lives. It was remark-

able to be there. Many of you were at other marches of this kind, those of you who are of that particular persuasion. I don't assume what your politics are, but for me this felt important personally. I want to protect people. I want to protect people who are black. I want to protect people who are brown.

I want to protect gays and lesbians and immigrants. I want to protect the dignity of everyone, including even the people who don't want to protect people. And I want to protect people who keep our laws. I want to protect the police and the government and the firefighters—all of it. But all of it out of respect.

And the beautiful thing about that march was that there was so much civility there. It was not just peaceful—yes, there were lots of kids and families and young people—but it had a spirit of love. It had a spirit of great care. And a kind of fierceness. This really matters. But it was also really civil and beautiful.

So here's a poem from my friend Alison Luterman, a wonderful poet in Oakland. She writes:

I see her on TV, screaming into a microphone. Her head is shaved, and she's beautiful, and seventeen, and her high school was just shot up, and she had to walk by friends lying in their own blood, her teacher bleeding out. And she's my daughter, the one I never had, and she's your daughter, and everyone's daughter, and she's her own woman in the fullness of her young fire, calling bullshit on politicians who take money from the gun makers. Tears rain down her face, but she doesn't stop speaking. She doesn't apologize. She keeps calling them out—all of them, all of us—who didn't do enough to stop this thing. And you can see the gray faces of those who've always held power contort, utterly baffled to face this new breed of young woman. Not silky. Not compliant. Not caring if they call her a ten or a troll. And she cries, but she doesn't stop speaking truth into the microphone, though her voice is raw and shaking and the sun is molten brass. I'm three thousand miles away thinking how Neruda said the blood of the children ran through the streets without fuss. Only now she is, they are, raising a fuss, shouting down the walls of Jericho. And it's not that we road-weary elders have been given the all-clear exactly. But our shoulders do let down a little. We breathe from a deeper place. We say to each other, well, it looks like the baton may be passing to these next runners. And they are fleet as thought and fiery as stars. And we take another breath and we say to each other, the baton has been passed. And we set off then, running hard behind them.

It's hard not to weep when I read it. I love the ending too, because it's not just them. We set off running, but hard behind them—because it's for all of us, for what we care about.

And each of you will have the things that you care about as you open, as your heart opens. As you become wiser in these ways that we've described, there's nothing else to do but to tend the earth—because it's you, it's your earth, it's your people.

And this isn't linear. There isn't one layer after another. But these are your gifts, your birthright, your capacity to rest in loving awareness and to open in these ways. It's why we come together—to remind ourselves. And it's also why our community here has offered this place for us for all these years: to come and be reminded.

I'm grateful for you coming. There are all kinds of wonderful programs here, as I mentioned, and now that you've been here, we invite you to come back to try a day-long retreat or a week-long retreat or a month-long retreat or do the kind of training that's offered.

And more than anything, to carry whatever was touched in you back out with your art, with your poetry, with your business acumen, as a parent, as a gardener, as someone who tends and cares for the earth.

This month at Spirit Rock is called Metta May, and so there are all kinds of classes and teachings on loving kindness. You can get one of these little Metta May things out there, or look online, and we invite you to that.

Thank you for coming. It's really a pleasure. Take care, and drive politely out there—it's very crowded. See you again, I hope. Good night.

CHAPTER 15

Mindful Loving Awareness - Monday Night Dharma Talk - Part 2 - Big Sky Mind Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 44 min

> *In this Monday night dharma talk from Spirit Rock's 33rd year of weekly gatherings, Jack Kornfield offers a guided meditation exploring the spacious nature of awareness itself. Rather than beginning with the traditional anchor of breath, this practice opens through the doorway of sound, inviting practitioners to sense that mind is not limited to the size of the head but is vast and open like the sky.*
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> *The meditation guides listeners to observe how sounds arise and pass away within spacious awareness, followed by thoughts appearing like clouds, emotions moving through like weather, and even the body floating as a field of changing sensations. This approach connects to the satipaṭṭhāna teachings on mindfulness of mind and mental phenomena, while emphasizing the quality of loving awareness—consciousness that is open, tender, and compassionate toward all beings lost in separateness and confusion.*
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> *Kornfield emphasizes that meditation practices are explorations rather than tests, and that among the 84,000 doorways to awakening, different approaches serve different practitioners at different times. The talk offers practical wisdom for bringing this spacious awareness into daily life—even in noisy urban settings—and raises the profound question of identity: if we are not our changing bodies, thoughts, or emotions, perhaps we are the awareness itself that witnesses all things yet remains unlimited by them.*

Good evening. It's a pleasure to welcome you here to Spirit Rock Center for this Monday night class. If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and the Monday night class is in its 33rd year here—easy to keep count because it was the year my daughter was born. Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful center and this gorgeous valley that we got from the Nature Conservancy through a whole community's effort and care and devotion to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, that are central to the teachings of the Buddha, but that are really part of all wise spiritual life.

So it's a pleasure to welcome you. How many of you are here for the first time? Particularly happy to have you. What we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We begin with a meditation—sometimes more of a silent meditation. Tonight will be a guided practice that I'll explain in a little bit. After that, we take a break to sit or walk, and following that, there's usually a teaching, on occasion dialogue or questions and answers.

In coming into the temple, the basic purpose is not so much to get anything. If anything, maybe this is the dump—it's the place to leave stuff. But more than anything, it's a place to be reminded of something that you already know, to return to a quality of presence of heart and mind and to reawaken in yourself, or reconnect, or support that which is already wise and is already loving. That's your own true nature.

This evening I'm also happy we're joined by the next group of teachers at Spirit Rock, the current four-year teacher training. Both the Spirit Rock teacher training and the IMS teacher training on the East Coast, our sister center which started at the same time, are predominantly people of color, so we're going to have close to 40 new teachers in the next few years, almost all of whom are also people of color. I would like to ask them—because I love them and they're a really great group, I told them they're the best we've had yet—if they wouldn't mind just standing up for a moment so people who are in the community can see who's coming to teach you. They are as varied and interesting and wonderful as they look—maybe even more so. We'll find out.

And I want to thank Antonio Aversano for playing that beautiful native flute. There are CDs and information about his sacred sound sessions out there for all who are interested. Thank you, Antonio. It was really beautiful.

Spirit Rock, as it has grown over these years, now offers all kinds of retreats and classes and trainings in compassion and forgiveness and loving-kindness and mindfulness of the body, and trainings for educators and for healthcare professionals, and family retreats and programs for parents and lawyers and all kinds of people—and the people that they need, yes, that's right.

I know when my daughter said she was going to become a lawyer, my heart sank a little bit. I said, "I don't know that many happy lawyers, kiddo." She said, "Chill out, Dad. I'm going to do human rights law. It's fine. It's okay." And she's great. But anyway, the Lawyers' Retreat is actually a really wonderful and important one because it's kindred spirits, where people come who have this sensibility of that which is sacred and want to imbue the work that they do. This is really important for all of us, because we live in a society that can be characterized by the absence of the sacred in many ways. To come to

a place or to come together in community and be reminded of the sacredness of life, in whatever language or form works for you, becomes not just a gift but almost an imperative to stay sane in the busy times that we live, in times that are so outer-directed.

So tonight I'd like us to start in a way a little bit differently than certain other Monday nights where we sit more silently. This is a guided meditation, and for some people it will work well; for others it's not the right flavor. There are 84,000 doorways into the sacred, and this is one of them.

But it's a beautiful one.

Ordinarily, for those who do mindfulness meditation practice—or loving awareness, as I like to call it—it's common to begin with mindfulness of the breath. Many of you already do that. Or mindfulness of the body. Or you begin to become aware of feelings and thoughts and so forth. These are part of what's called the foundations of mindfulness.

Tonight's meditation will start by opening our attention, our loving awareness, not to the breath and body, but rather to sound itself—to the doorway of the ear. And with it, as the meditation is guided, you'll be invited to sense the open spaciousness of mind itself, within which we can then become aware of body and breath and heart and mind and all that arises.

All meditations are really an exploration. They're an invitation to discover something. So let yourself discover. It may work or it may not. If it's frustrating, that's okay—you can be mindful of that. If you hate it, you can simply notice: "Oh, I hate this. How's that? Interesting." It doesn't matter. It'll just be what it is. And if you want to, you can always return to your other practice of mindfulness of breath or something else.

But let's practice together, especially on this beautiful spring evening where the grasses are still green, waving up the hill, about to turn golden as you know. They're changing their hair color, as one does in California. It's a beautiful evening.

So feel yourself present as you can in this beautiful place and valley. First, let your eyes close gently and come back to a quality of presence. Here you are, seated halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. Let your body be at ease as you sit. Let your attention rest with a loving awareness, just here and now.

As you rest here in the reality of the present, the ever-present moment, bring your attention to sound—to the doorway of the ear—and notice the play of sound as it arises and passes away. There are the soft sounds in the room. Sometimes distant sounds of traffic or air traffic. There is the sound of these words as they arise and pass away, appearing and then vanishing. And there is the sound of the bells.

Relax. Rest just here and now, and let the sounds come and go—appearing and disappearing. Words, soft sounds in the room, and even the sound of silence.

As you listen, let yourself imagine or sense or feel in any way you can that your mind is not limited to the size of your head, that it's bigger—as big as this whole room and even more vast. Open like the sky, without inside or outside. Let yourself feel your mind open like the sky, allowing sounds to appear like clouds or bubbles. Sounds nearby and distant sounds. Bells and silence. Arising and passing in the vast open space of mind.

Relax. Rest in the spaciousness and let the sounds arise and appear like clouds, then disappear, leaving no trace.

In its true nature, mind is not limited by the body. Mind is vast and open, transparent and timeless, allowing for all things yet not limited by them. To know if this is so or not, look directly at the nature of your own mind.

And notice too: just as sounds arise in the vast space of mind and disappear, so too do thoughts and images arise. Word thoughts, picture thoughts appear like clouds and tell a little story or show an image, then dissolve back into the silence.

Sounds arise and pass. Thoughts appear, display themselves, and vanish on their own.

Rest in the space of awareness itself. Relax into it. Trust it. Let the appearances of sounds and images and words come and go, come and go, like clouds.

Sounds come and go.

Thoughts, images, and words appear like clouds and float in the vast space of mind, vanishing like clouds or bubbles. Rest in the spaciousness, the clear sky of awareness. It is your own true nature. It is home.

Notice too how feelings and emotions can arise like weather in the sky. Sadness or boredom, frustration, longing, love, joy—like weather, they appear for a time and color the sky. And then they too dissolve and vanish. Just as sounds and thoughts arise like clouds, so too the weather brings moods and feelings. Easy come, easy go. Let them arise and pass as they will. You are the vast sky.

Sounds come and go. Thoughts and images arise like clouds in the vast space and sky of awareness. Moods and emotions appear like weather for a time and then pass away.

Notice too how the body floats in the vast space of awareness. If you sense directly, there is no solid body. There are areas of pressure and warmth, of tingling and coolness, hardness and softness—a field of energy that is ever changing, floating in the vast space of awareness. Relax and let the energy field of the body float and change slowly. It breathes, and the breath moves like a breeze in the space. And you are the vast space of awareness itself.

Sounds come and go. The breath moves like a breeze. Moods and emotions float and color the sky like weather for a time and then disappear. Thoughts and images, sensations arise and exist for a time and pass away. You are the awareness itself that contains all things and is yet not limited by them. You are consciousness, loving awareness.

And as you feel the vastness and connection with all things, let there arise a deep sense of compassion for all those beings who forget who they really are, who are lost in separateness and fear and confusion. The vast sky is loving awareness itself—open, tender, allowing for all things, yet not limited by them. Rest in consciousness itself, in loving awareness. This is your true nature. Trust it. Relax into it. It is your home.

And when you hear the sound of the bell and you're ready, let your eyes open again and remain with the sense of vastness as the colors and images appear, all within the same vast space of loving awareness, of consciousness itself.

Did some of you have a sense that your mind wasn't the size of your head, that there was some sense of spaciousness and openness? I see some people nodding. I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand because the people who don't will feel left out. But it's not because you're the superior meditators—sorry about that. It's just that this particular practice on this day worked for you.

Because there are many different practices, you have to sense, as you let yourself open to a spiritual life, which are the gates that touch your own heart and allow you to open. For some, it might be the practice of loving-kindness or compassion or forgiveness. For others, it's the simplicity of the breath. But for some, or at some times, this sense of opening to vastness can be really helpful.

And it's not just when you're in the temple. You can be sitting out at a café in Berkeley or San Anselmo or the Mission, and it's noisy, and there are people going by, cars in the streets, and you think, how could I ever meditate? And then you close your eyes and

say, oh, like John Cage, the music of life—I'm just going to listen to the play of all these sounds and become the spacious vastness. And then all of a sudden, all of it becomes workable. You come back to this place that you have touched before, of spaciousness and timelessness and openness.

So if it was helpful, feel free to play with it. If it wasn't, the basic rule of meditation is: don't use it to judge yourself.

You're already very good at that. You don't need any improvement in that area, right? Instead, say thank you. Perhaps this is not the right practice for this evening, and return to what you know serves you. But it is a beautiful practice for the times when it can work. And it points to something quite extraordinary, which we'll explore more later this evening.

We tend to be identified with our bodies, our thoughts and opinions. Have you noticed that? And with our feelings. But the thing is, they keep changing. So who are we? If we're not our bodies, if we're not our thoughts and opinions, maybe you're the spirit that was born into this body and that will leave it someday—believe me, that's going to happen. Maybe what you are is actually spirit or consciousness.

So we'll leave that as a question for us.

It's now time to take a break for ten or fifteen minutes to stretch or relax. You can keep that sense of openness as you walk around, if it's helpful to you. If it's not—if you're in a place where you need more of a sense of protection—you have to respect that too. Then don't do that. Come back to your feet on the earth, to a sense of compassionate holding of your own body and being.

For those who wish, there are cookies outside. There's the bookstore for mindful shopping, for those who need to do such things. If someone near you raised their hand as a person here for the first time, you might turn and introduce yourself, welcome them.

We'll take a little break and ring the bell again in ten or fifteen minutes to come back. Thank you.

CHAPTER 16

Remembering Ajahn Chah

Jack Kornfield · 1h04

> *On the occasion of Ajahn Chah's 100th birthday, Jack Kornfield offers a deeply personal tribute to his beloved teacher, weaving together stories from his years as a monk in the Thai forest tradition with the timeless wisdom he received. Through vivid recollections—from Ajahn Chah's delight at discovering American forests to his compassionate yet direct teaching style—Kornfield illuminates what it means to create "zones of peace" and to stop the inner war against the way things are.*
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> *The talk explores Ajahn Chah's essential teaching of "taking the one seat"—sitting in the center of one's experience with loving awareness, allowing all phenomena to arise and pass without becoming entangled. Kornfield shares how Ajahn Chah taught that the Dhamma is fundamentally about the heart, and that suffering arises not from life's inevitable pains but from our reactions and attachments to them. The instruction to "become the one who knows" points to the shift from identification with changing experiences to resting as awareness itself.*
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> *This teaching carries profound relevance for navigating contemporary challenges with wisdom rather than reactivity. Kornfield emphasizes that awakening doesn't require remote monasteries or special circumstances—the perfect conditions exist within each person's own life. Drawing on the Therīgāthā (songs of the early Buddhist nuns) and his recent dialogue with Ram Dass, he reminds listeners of their fundamental dignity and capacity for compassion, invoking the traditional address: "O nobly born, remember who you really are."*

Please let yourself sit in a way that's comfortable and at ease. For tonight, let yourself listen as you would in a meditation practice. It's not a lecture where you have to take notes, and there's no quiz at the end. It's more about listening to see if something resonates as true for you, something that reminds your heart and spirit of what you already know to be important, deep, and valuable. The rest of it you can simply let go.

I'm very happy to be able to sit together. It's a bit of a disaster out there in certain ways with our news—problematic, to say the least. But to be able to come and sit together in the midst of the changes in the world, many of which are rather dramatic, to quiet the mind and tend the heart so that we can hold it all in a wise way and hopefully respond in a wise way, to be together in that spirit of wisdom and compassion—this is really important.

If we look, there are things that remind us or awaken us out of our separateness, out of our habit of checking off our to-do lists and feeling isolated from the rest of the world. These experiences awaken us and remind us to love. Remember what it was like when you were in love? I know almost all of you can remember that. It's pretty sweet, isn't it? And it's actually possible to be in love with the world, with people, with this place. This mysterious, marvelous human realm with its unbearable beauty and its ocean of tears—you can love this. You can step out of that sense of isolation and separateness, what's sometimes called the small sense of self, or the body of fear.

We get reminded of it in so many different ways. Sometimes walking in the high mountains, or listening to an amazing piece of music, or making love, or sitting at the bedside of someone who's dying. The gates between the worlds open, and you realize, "Oh yes, this is also going to happen to me." Isn't this mysterious, that we have a certain life for a certain time? Or being there for the birth of a child—that's so wild. Here's another human being. Where do they come from? It's wild.

Another way that we wake up—and it's beautiful just to recognize that we can wake up from the trance we move in—is sometimes through spiritual teachings or teachers of different kinds who remind us of our own beauty, our own buddha nature, our own fundamental goodness. Somehow we are supported. Even as we come here to Spirit Rock, we're supported by a stream of thousands of years of people who also treasured awakening and compassion and connection with all life and respect.

I know that for a time I did a Tibetan practice where you do full prostrations and visualize a tree of benefactors—your teachers and the people who've blessed you. You populate the tree with everybody who's ever been a teacher or guide or mentor or benefactor. I started filling my tree up, and it became like a Christmas tree: that one, and that one, and that one. Then I would bow and say thank you. Because we're not here alone. You're here with your ancestors. We're here with the ancestors of this land, the Miwok who lived and tended this land. We're here with thousands of generations.

Tonight, because this week marks one hundred years since my teacher Ajahn Chah was born—his hundredth birthday—I want to share something of that lineage. I can still hear his voice, which is a fantastic thing. Don't you know that experience when someone you cared about deeply has died, and there are moments when you can still hear just what they sounded like and what they'd say? I feel very blessed by that. I want to talk about the stream of teachings that have come to Spirit Rock, teachings that I received, that so many other people received, from this wonderful teacher.

A few weeks ago, Ajahn Pasanno, who runs Abhayagiri Monastery in Mendocino, came and offered a whole day on the hundredth birthday teachings of Ajahn Chah. My other dear friends—Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Amaro, Ayya Anandabodhi—all these beautiful monastics who still carry his spirit are also part of our community.

I first met Ajahn Chah when he was forty-nine years old, in 1967. He was a very plain-spoken person. His main language was Lao, which I had fortunately learned during my years in the Peace Corps, when I was on medical village teams doing tropical medicine work on the border of Laos and Thailand.

Looking at this picture of him smiling, I used to think of him as kind of like a frog because he had this giant mouth that could turn down. Then he would get animated and it would turn up, and this huge laughter would come out of him.

When I first arrived, there were forty-five monks and a couple dozen nuns at his monastery. When he died, thirty years later, a million people went to his funeral, including the King and Queen of Thailand. He became a truly revered fountain of wisdom in that culture.

He lived as part of the tradition of forest monks, those who live in the jungles and forests. He had his little bag of roots and herbs and herbal medicine. He'd lived in caves, out with the tigers. It was remarkable, during the years I was there, to be able to live in these somewhat remote forest monasteries.

But I realized that before I talk a bit more about him, I want to let him introduce himself to you. There is just a six-minute clip from a BBC documentary called *The Mindful Way* that was shot in the 1970s that will give you a little taste of it.

These monks in northeast Thailand are on Bindabhat, the daily dawn walk to receive their food offered by the villagers. Not all monks in Thailand keep strictly to the discipline prescribed by the Buddha, but these monks strive to maintain the original forest tradition of a pure and simple life. They're not allowed to possess money nor grow their own food. This ensures their total dependence on the lay community, so they can't cut themselves off in a spiritual cocoon.

The abbot, the venerable Ajahn Chah, has been in robes for 50 years.

"Here in the forest, you can learn to be in harmony with the way things are in nature. You can live happily and peacefully. Buddhist monks don't practice meditation for selfish reasons. We practice in order to know ourselves so that then we'll be able to understand and teach others how to live peacefully and wisely."

This monk has been ordained for 15 years. He's respected not only for his skill in meditation, but also for his practical skills, his consistent mindfulness.

Meditation doesn't just involve being at peace with the world. Confronting the self can be like walking into a raging storm. It's quite usual at first to despair, even to want to kill oneself.

"Some people think that a monk's life is a lazy and an easy one. If that's what they think, they should just try and see how long they can stand it. A monk's work is hard. He works to free his heart so that he begins to feel loving kindness which embraces everything. He sees that all life has the characteristic of the breath. It rises and it falls. Everything that is born expires. So his suffering diminishes as he knows that nothing belongs to him."

"To help people contemplate the true nature of the body, we have human skeletons in the assembly hall. Because when one doesn't understand death, life is very confusing."

"Buddha made a distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth. The idea of a self is merely a convention. Foreigner, Thai, you, the interviewer—these are all conventions. In ultimate reality, there isn't anybody. There is only earth, fire, water, air—elements which have combined temporarily. We call the body a person, mind. But ultimately, there is no me. There is only anatta, not self. When we see beyond self, we no longer cling to happiness. And when we stop clinging, we can begin to be happy."

"Shouldn't be concerned with nirvana or attaining nirvana. If you are, then that in itself will prevent you from gaining nirvana."

"So what should a monk's main concern be?"

"The aim is to let go."

"So you have to let go but without striving to let go?"

"That's right. You should let go without desire. If there's still desire in the pursuit to do that, then that's not nirvana."

"Be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still like a clear forest pool. All kinds of rare animals will come to drink at the pool. You will see many wonderful and strange things come and go, but you will be still. Problems will arise, but you will see through them immediately. This is the happiness of the Buddha."

I think Ajahn Chah would have been laughing at that voice recognition that was trying to make language translations from Thai and Lao into some really wild stuff. Siri does that all the time, but she was really in good form tonight.

But you get a sense in seeing him of both the delight that he had and the wisdom and the honesty.

When he first came to the U.S., we picked him up at the Boston airport.

And drove him along Memorial Drive in Boston. "Okay, this is MIT, and this is Harvard." We went through Harvard Square and so forth. He was okay with all of that.

And then we got on the Massachusetts Turnpike to go out to our center in central Massachusetts in Barre, in the hills. We got a little ways outside of Boston, outside the big ring road, and then of course it turned into more agricultural land, lots of trees and so forth, which you see across New England.

So we're driving along, and he said, "What's this?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "All these trees." I said, "They're trees." He said, "Pull over."

So we pulled over. He got out of the car and walked up to the fence, and there was one of those New England forests. He was smelling the air, and he said, "Forest! What kind of animals live here? Are there bears? Are there lions?" He just loved the forest.

I said, "Okay, there used to be bears. There are occasionally, but mostly it's deer and this and that." "Well, how far do these forests go?" he asked. I said, "Well, probably from here north through Canada, maybe a thousand miles." He said, "Oh, forest monks! Great! The right place for us."

You see, his vision of the U.S.—when he was a boy, he'd seen some cowboy movies, so he'd seen the western desert with people on horses, and then he'd seen movies about New York City. He had no idea that we actually had forests here. He was completely delighted.

And he and his colleague, another great master, Ajahn Buddhadasa, when we talked about the hard time that people have in the West meditating and caring for themselves, loving themselves, how much self-hatred and self-judgment there is—they said, "Bring them out to the forests. Let them spend time with the trees and the rhythm of the moon and the sun and the stars, and teach them practices of loving-kindness and compassion. That will soothe their hearts and get them sane again." Something like that was his answer.

So I had gone to find a master when I was quite young. After graduating from college, I asked the Peace Corps to send me to a Buddhist country because I knew I needed something to help me with the kind of inner struggles that young people have. But I had a lot of them, and my family was difficult. My father was a violent, abusive person.

Last week I was in Los Angeles with my beloved, with Trudy, and we went as volunteers to a shelter for battered women. We went with Amy Wakeland, who's the wife of Eric Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles, who supports a number of really great projects. We were interested in her center and in sending mindfulness teachers and compassion teachers to places like this.

And I found it so poignant to be there. First of all, it was a secret place. They wouldn't tell us where it was. They had to van us there because they didn't want anybody to know the address, to protect the women who were there.

All of a sudden I started to get all these memories from my past—of my mother hiding bottles behind the curtains so she would have a weapon to defend herself in certain rooms, of not going out in public except in long sleeves because of all the black and blue on her body, and the kind of terror that I experienced from my father. It was the 1950s, and there weren't places like this. She had four kids, and she kept saying, "I should leave him." But she didn't.

So it was a very painful and poignant place to be, and to meet women who were being cared for and held and taken in—in some way that I wished my mother could have experienced, and that we could have too. I have to say, I heard on the radio today that our Attorney General has now declared that even if you are the victim of horrific violence of this kind, you're not eligible for asylum in the U.S., which kind of breaks my heart and makes me want to actually do something politically. That's another story that's important.

Anyway, when you go into Ajahn Chah's monastery, it was entering a place of peace. It felt so peaceful in this forest. It's the way Spirit Rock has become for many people, especially those who've taken a series of classes or done a residential retreat. People will

come in with the stress in their life—their financial problems, the things they have to take care of, stuff going on with their body, their confusion, their dreams, their creativity, questions of how to live, in the middle of a divorce—all the things that make up our modern human life.

And I love watching people's faces, especially people who go on retreat. They come in haggard, and they leave with what we call the Vipassana facelift. Their eyes are brighter, their faces look five or ten years younger. We could sell this in Hollywood, I know we could. And they're paying attention to the movement of the clouds and to the flowers blooming around the dining hall. It's almost like they get their spirit and their life back in some way. It's a beautiful thing.

So the same kind of experience was what it was like to walk into his forest monastery. Fortunately, we have it here in this beautiful valley. There was the jungle, and then you'd enter, and there would be these long paths that were swept clean every day. It was part of our job as monks and nuns with these long bamboo brooms. And it didn't matter if you swept the path absolutely clean—by the time you got to the other end, the leaves were already falling where you'd started. The point was somehow to do it with graciousness and beauty, to make the sweeping itself a part of the rhythm of life there.

So you'd come in and you'd see people who were dignified. There was a kind of impeccability, a terrific care for discipline. And somehow they made the inner beauty mirrored by the outer beauty. There was some way in which they made that inner peace visible through how they cared for the forests and the paths and the robes.

And then there were little signs as you came in, like: "You there, be quiet. We're trying to meditate. This is not the city." Or: "Hey there, life is short. What matters to you? Come on, get on with it." Little nudgy Dharma signs. The idea was somehow to create, as we have in this valley, a place that reminds us of another way to be.

Of course, we were near the border of Cambodia and Laos. So when I was there—both on those tropical medicine teams and then in the monastery—it was the time of the American war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Southeast Asian War. There was a big air base not far away, so we would see fighter jets and bombers relatively frequently.

I remember these friends who came, who were in the IVS, the International Volunteer Service, which was the equivalent of the Peace Corps—but I believe it was actually run by the CIA in Vietnam and Laos, because they weren't safe enough for Peace Corps. Anyway, that's another whole story. But they came in and they were upset with me. We were old friends. "What are you doing sitting on your butt when there's a war going on?

When there are people who are in danger? When unthinkable cruel things are happening and suffering is enormous? Why don't you come back out and join the fight in some way?"

What happened after they stayed in the monastery for about a week is they began to realize that it was a zone of peace. They talked to Ajahn Chah about it, and he said, "You know, for those of us who live as monks in this thousand-year-old tradition, wars come and go and leaders come and go. Our task is to create a place of sanity that reminds people, even when there's great difficulty, that there is another way."

Because if you were around the war zone, you had to be careful—your life would be in danger, your things would be stolen, people are desperate. In the monastery, you could lose your gold earring or your wallet and somebody would pick it up and place it on the altar until you came back. It was a place of such integrity, such care. It was like an island of sanity.

And then Ajahn Chah said, "We human beings are constantly in combat, at war, trying to escape the fact of being so limited—limited by so many circumstances we cannot control. But instead of escaping, we continue to create suffering: waging war with evil, waging war with good, waging war with what is too small, waging war with what is too big, waging war with what is too short or too long, right or wrong, courageously carrying on the battle. Why not stop the war? Why not step out of the battle and come to a place of peace?"

It was really a visionary place in that way. Perhaps another night I'll tell a story about being in a remarkable monastery of a similar kind in the Mekong Delta, in the middle of the war in Vietnam, that was also a zone of peace—where those who were trying to run from the bombings and firefights could come and find refuge.

What Ajahn Chah talked about, and my other teachers as well, is that it's not just that we have to do away with landmines and bombing. We have to do away with the landmines in the human heart. We have to do away with the violence in the human heart. Here we live in a society where there's racism and environmental destruction and continuing warfare. Where does it come from? It comes from us human beings. It comes from our own minds and hearts. And some of us have to stop, have to find a different way, and become that, and model that. This is a reminder, an invitation.

You could hear in the last part of that video, even with all the funny language underneath, Ajahn Chah talking about the still forest pool—to let things take their natural course, to let your heart and mind become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool, and to see all the wonders of the world, the amazing things. Mary Oliver's line: "I was a bride married to amazement."

For Ajahn Chah, there's this new biography that was just published by a friend who was a monk—a thousand pages or something, full of great stories. Because I was there, I'm loving reading it. It tells in part about his own practice, which wasn't easy in his early years. He lived out in jungles.

There were tigers, and he lived in the caves, and tremendous physical pain, and all the kinds of struggles that one might have as a renunciate in a very poor environment. Part of the time anyway, in the dry season, there was not a great deal to eat in those villages, and he was struggling somehow to find a place of unshakable peace in himself.

When we came to the monastery, his instructions were actually quite simple and not very different than what we did tonight. He called it taking the one seat. He said, just go into the room and put one chair in the center. Take the one seat in the center of the room, open the doors and windows, and see who comes to visit. You'll witness all kinds of scenes and actors, all kinds of temptations and stories, everything imaginable. Your only job is to stay in your seat. You'll see it all arise and pass. And out of this, wisdom, deep compassion, and understanding will arise.

I like to use the word loving awareness as a synonym for mindfulness. And for Ajahn Chah, meditation wasn't about gaining some special state. It was taking the one seat in the middle of it all, stopping the war against the way things are. Instead, quieting the mind, bringing the spirit of loving awareness here, letting things settle, and then noticing when you get entangled, when you get caught, when you get afraid and reactive, and discovering that it's possible to see that with loving awareness and not get so caught, to find a kind of inner freedom.

Someone asked him at one point, what is the Dharma? This is a word that means truth, it means the teachings—it's kind of a complicated set of different meanings. And he said, the Dharma is the heart. If you want to practice the Dharma or learn the Dharma, learn the truth, learn the way, just look into the heart. What spirit, what heart are you using to guide your life, to move through this world? Why not quiet yourself and listen in a way so that you're in touch with your heart rather than all the things that people around you want you to do? He would ask, what's the state of your heart today?

He was very interested in human suffering. Anybody here have that? But his interest was not just in suffering. He would say that's not the end of the story. There's suffering, there's its causes, and there's its end. Life has pain—everybody knows that. There's pleasure and pain and gain and loss and fame and disrepute and joy and sorrow and praise and blame and hot and cold. This is what makes up life in some way. But suffering is different. Suffering is all our reactions and responses and entanglements in it. And he wanted us to shift from the creation of suffering to the freedom of heart.

My teacher Nisargadatta used to say, the mind creates suffering, the mind creates the abyss, and the heart crosses it. And he wanted us to really listen from the heart.

I remember being there, and there was a big festival at the closest village to the forest monastery. Usually it was very quiet, but they had giant loudspeakers and all kinds of music and a village fair. One of the monks came and complained that it wasn't quiet. Ajahn Chah laughed. He said, there's the noise, but I have a question. Who's bothering who? The noise isn't doing anything. What is your relationship to it? Who's bothering who?

He would tootle around the monastery at different points, and if you looked like you were having a hard time, he'd gaze at you and say, hmm, you suffering today? If you said no, he'd say, wonderful, enjoy the day. If you said yes, he'd say, hmm, must be quite attached. And then he'd sort of tootle off. That was it. That was how simple it was. It wasn't very complicated. He wanted us to see how we got entangled and where the roots were, which were in our own lives.

I remember one Western monk, an English monk named Aranya Po. He's kind of famous for this story because he was never satisfied. He went to a remote forest monastery, but it was too quiet. There wasn't any good teaching.

So Ajahn Chah sent him to a monastery near Bangkok where there was this famous teacher, but it was too noisy. Then he went to a monastery on the Cambodian border, but it was too poor. He just always couldn't find the satisfactory thing. Finally, he came back. Everyone was sitting around with Ajahn Chah, and he was asking about where to go next to find the right thing. And Ajahn Chah said, "You know, this poor monk—he must have put his monk's bag down in dog shit. And everywhere he goes, it smells bad." As I said, he was very plain spoken, but you get the message, right?

When I was sitting in meditation classes, trying to be very peaceful—yeah, Mr. Peace, right?—all this anger came up. It really shocked me because I was not going to be like my father, a violent, angry person. So where did that anger go? All suppressed in there. And then I'm sitting, and all this stuff starts to come up.

I went to see him because some monk in the nearby hut had done something—just a small thing—and I just got enraged. I knew it had nothing to do with that monk; I was at least that savvy. I said, "All this anger is coming up. What should I do?"

He smiled and said, "Oh, good. You get to learn about anger. It's the hot season. Go in your hut, little tin roof hut. Close the one window and the door. Wrap yourself in all your robes and cook." He said, "If you're going to be angry, do it right. Sit in the middle of it and name it—anger, or fire—so you're not so damn afraid of it."

His direction came from this faith that if we could turn toward our deepest experiences—the deep experiences of love and care and connection, and also the things we fear like anxiety and anger—if we could actually sit in their presence, there would grow a shift of identity. This is the great gift of meditation: a shift from the contents—here's anger, here's fear—to loving awareness itself that would say, "Oh, this is the angry mind. This is how the angry mind works. This is the heart that's been hurt." Mostly anger comes because we've been hurt or we've been frightened, or there's something we've been in some way abused or mistreated.

He said, "These things are natural. You have to learn to be in the presence of all the energies of nature—the wild energies and the peaceful and beautiful ones."

"Desire comes," he said. "Make your loving awareness like a parent taking a kid to the store." You know by the checkout there's all the candy, right? And the idea from the parent isn't to hit the child or something like that. You just see that they're a kid and they want everything, and that's part of being a child. Desire is natural. There's healthy desire and unhealthy desire. It's not until you become the loving awareness that you have a choice to decide which are the ones you want to give to this child, which are the things that are healthy for you and which are not.

There was some way in which he just made it our common humanity. We'd be sitting around with him, and he'd introduce his monks to people. "Some of my monks are really big eaters, like me." Ajahn Chah was a little bit overweight, he would say of himself. "They're all like me. We do that. Some of my monks are just big sleepers. They eat and then they sleep."

And then I've got some monks who all they want to do is meditate. I think they're afraid of relating, basically.

I remember bringing a group of friends to visit Ajahn Chah in his monastery in the seventies—Joseph Goldstein, Mark Epstein, a whole bunch of people who are now dharma teachers, and Ram Dass. We were all sitting around, and Ram Dass was about fifteen years older than the rest of us. We were still maybe around thirty years old, and

Ram Dass was like forty-five or something, with a beard, coming from India. The first thing Ajahn Chah did was peer around the group. "Okay, who'd you bring?" And then he said, "Hey, who's the old man you brought with you?" He was right on Ram Dass's case immediately.

But he could also be so tender. We went to visit the largest Trappist monastery in New England, called Spencer Abbey—one of the main Trappist monasteries, like Thomas Merton's Gethsemane Abbey. When Ajahn Chah was there, we went to visit because those monks, who lived a few towns over, had become friends, and some of them would come and sit at our retreat center in Barre. The abbot, Father Thomas Keating, was a gracious and very wise, beautiful man who has become a kind of famous Christian contemplative. So we took Ajahn Chah over there.

About a hundred of their monks in their black and white outfits—which remind me of penguins, elegant penguins, I have to say—were there in the courtyard. And then there were these monks in their dusty orange robes, a different costume altogether. All the monks were gathered. Thomas Keating is this very tall man, and Ajahn Chah is quite short, a little bit round. They were standing next to each other. I introduced them, and Ajahn Chah sized him up very quickly, as he used to do. He just peered at people.

And then he said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Thomas Keating asked, "Why is he saying 'I'm so sorry'?" It was a strange greeting, right? "I'm so sorry."

And then Ajahn Chah turned around and looked at all the hundred monks who were there, and he said, "You know, being an abbot is a really, really hard job. And you should love and support this man. He's really doing you a favor to take this role."

Keating's eyes lit up, and this huge smile came across his face. Yes—somebody understands.

So Ajahn Chah was very tender at times. And his interest was to shift from confusion and difficulty and fear—all those things that we have and know—to finding peace in your own heart, to finding well-being.

When he was teaching at IMS, at our retreat center in Massachusetts, I remember we were out wandering, taking a walk on the great big grassy lawn in front, and people were doing their walking meditation. He turned to me and said, "You know, this place looks like a big hospital." It wasn't the forest—it was big brick buildings, New England style. And then he started to walk up to people as they were doing their walking meditation. He'd smile and say, "I hope you get well soon."

But he didn't set things up as some kind of ideal. He told us that when he was a young abbot, trying to get it all right, wanting everybody to behave in the right way, they would never do exactly what he wanted. You know how people are, right? So he said, "All right, I've figured it out now." He had all the monks come in and lie down, lining up with their feet on a certain line in the meditation hall, so they were all very even. And he said, "That's really great, except for one thing—your heads aren't even." So then he had them slide down until their heads were all in a line. And he said, "That's really great, except for one thing—your feet aren't even."

Finally he said, "Okay, stand up. This is who we are. We're short and tall, and this is the way that it is. We have to live with each other the way that we are, not the way that we imagine we're supposed to be."

It wasn't idealistic.

The driver taking us was a young guy who drove really fast, as certain young men like to do—some of whom I've known quite intimately, but I'll leave that aside. It was a one-lane dirt road through the mountains, maybe one and a half lanes, so two cars could pass if they went slowly. Mostly it was pretty empty in those days. But once in a while, a logging truck or a bus would come around a curve. And this guy was just careening around the corners. You couldn't really see what was ahead.

I'm holding on, thinking, okay, I'm going to die a monk. I guess this is it. I started to breathe and center myself, getting ready for my death. And then I look over at Ajahn Chah, and his knuckles are white too. Somehow that gave me some relief. Okay. So we're in it together.

Finally, we asked him to slow down. He wouldn't listen—didn't slow down, or not very much. But we made it. We pulled into the courtyard of the Cambodian monastery, and Ajahn Chah looked over at me, smiled, and said, "Scary ride, wasn't it?"

It was beautiful. It wasn't like he was going to pretend there wasn't fear. It was like going to Disneyland and riding the big roller coaster. It was just fear. Fear is what the body does at certain moments. Scary ride.

And I knew he wasn't afraid of dying. In many ways, he had shown that. He was simply saying: these emotions, they come. It's totally fine to see the way things are and to know that you have the capacity—your loving awareness—to be present for this life, and to know that you are bigger than all of it.

I remember when I was very sick with malaria. I was wretched, lying on the floor of my little hut on my robes. Ajahn Chah came to visit. He looked at me, and again, the language was very simple.

He said, "Sick, huh?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Fever and pain, huh?"

I said, "Lots of it."

He said, "Yeah. Makes you want to go home to your mother, doesn't it?"

I said, "Yes. Yes."

He said, "Well, this is suffering. This is suffering. Most of us as monks have had this a number of times. Now there's good medicine. I'll send the medicine monk over to help you. But you know, you can do this. This is just malaria. We know how to do this."

And he just stood there. I could feel that he'd been through it all. He was saying, yeah, yeah, we know how to do this. It's tough, but it's okay.

It wasn't some ideal. It was that we know how to be wise. We know how to be compassionate and loving in the midst of it all. These were the kinds of trainings he would give to people who came.

After I left—I was the second Westerner to be with him—there was a monk named Ajahn Sumedho, the one who had told me about Ajahn Chah. He had been there for a few years before me and became an abbot himself and a very wonderful teacher.

As the word got out that this was a great master, Western European and North American students, Japanese people from around the world started to come. One visitor began to see these different foreign monks arriving and asked Ajahn Chah whether he spoke English or French or German or Japanese. In every case, he replied no, he couldn't. The questioner looked confused. How did the foreign monks learn anything then?

He answered with a question. "Do you keep animals at home? Have you got any cats or dogs? Any oxen or buffalo?"

"Yes."

"Well, can you speak cat language? Do you speak dog? Can you speak buffalo?"

"No."

"Then how do they know what you want them to do?"

This was his first reply. Then he summarized: "It's not that difficult. Training the Westerners is like training water buffalo. You just keep tugging on the rope and soon they catch on."

But he could be so tender. A farmer would come whose child had died, and Ajahn Chah would hold him and put his head in his lap, just so compassionate. Then the next day some puffed up, corrupt official from Bangkok would arrive with all his medals. Ajahn Chah would take out his false teeth so he looked kind of gummy, and give some lecture about karma and corruption and dishonesty and where it was going to lead.

Underneath it all, beneath the form of the monastery, there was tremendous care. The rules were kept, the virtue and the vinaya. It was like the form of a beautiful poem. If you write a sonnet, you have a certain meter and a certain number of lines. But within that, you can make great beauty. So there were these outer forms that we followed, but inside there was a tremendous sense of freedom. He could laugh at almost anything and see where you were holding on.

There was a Western woman who became a nun at the monastery that was built about eight miles away in a village. There were so many Westerners that Ajahn Chah had said, "Why don't we make a monastery where the teachings are in English?" He asked Ajahn Sumedho, this American monk, to be the abbot, and the villagers built this beautiful monastery. There were twenty or thirty Westerners. This nun, who was quite eloquent and learned the language, became one of the villagers' favorites.

After about five years, she left. People were disappointed. A year later, she came back—but she had gotten another kind of religion. She'd become a born-again Christian, and an evangelist at that. So she came back to the monastery, and now she was trying to tell everybody about Jesus.

She was not terribly popular in the monastery for doing that, and not terribly popular with the villagers who had supported her, but she was still there doing it. They were really upset. Finally, in their upset, a whole group of villagers and some of the monks walked over to Ajahn Chah's monastery. They told the story of her coming back and trying to convert everybody, saying Jesus was the way. They were all upset.

He listened to it. He knew this was happening—the grapevine in the monastery is like any other grapevine. He listened to it all. How could she do this? We fed her and trusted her and now she's come back. He listened for a while, sat quietly, and said, "Well, you know, maybe she's right."

And it just diffused it. Everybody was on their horse about how it was supposed to be. We need that wisdom now with all the political conflict as well.

Maybe there's something that actually needs to be listened to from somebody who's different. And it doesn't mean you can't respond. It doesn't mean that there aren't things we need to stand up for now. But how do we do it, and from which place? Do we do it out of aggression or out of fear? That just perpetuates it. Or can we stop the war and respond by saying, this is something worth standing up for, that really matters—but to do it with the kind of courage like Gandhi would, to say, do what you will, I have to stand up for this because my love for you and everyone else, even those of you who are creating suffering, I love you too. And I love you so much that I don't want to let you continue to make this kind of suffering for others. It's a very different way of responding.

Ajahn Chah taught a kind of fearlessness—to be present for this human life, to tolerate it, and to allow all the energies of life. As you meditate, you learn how to really be present. He also taught how to step back and see that like the breath, it's all impermanent, that you can't grasp it. He said, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you really learn to let go, you can move anywhere freely.

And that was part of his teaching. He went to visit Ajahn Mun—*ajahn* means a kind of *acharya* in Sanskrit, a master or teacher—one of the other great forest masters. Ajahn Chah was still practicing as a monk in the forest after about ten years of living in caves and doing his meditation. Along with great struggles, when he was finally able to practice deeply, he experienced deep insights and visions and light, all the kinds of meditation experiences one might have.

So he went to see this great master, Ajahn Mun, bowed and paid his respects, and said, "I want to tell you about all my meditation practices and what I've seen and learned," and kind of laid out all those experiences. Ajahn Mun sat quietly, listened, and then looked up and said, "Chah, you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. They're like movies." He said, "You go to the movies and there's a romantic comedy and there's a documentary and there's a war movie and there's a historical drama. They appear on the screen and disappear." He said, "These are the same. Luminous states and rapture and physical pain and suffering and insights and confusion—those are all states. The only question that matters if you want to be free is: to whom do they hap-

pen? Turn your attention from the changing experiences back to consciousness itself, to awareness, what we're calling loving awareness or consciousness itself. Become the witnessing—what in that language is called become the one who knows, become the knowing."

So you become loving awareness that is the witness to all of this—joys and sorrows, praise and blame, gain and loss. And when you do, then the real freedom and real well-being, the happiness that's not dependent on anything, the happiness for no cause, the freedom that's not dependent on circumstances—will start to mature and grow in your own heart. To stop the war with the world, to take one seat in the middle of all things, and then become the one who knows. Become the Buddha, the awakened one, loving awareness itself.

I have this beautiful set of poems that were sent to me recently, translations from the earliest Buddhist nuns:

One morning after alms round, begging for my breakfast, looking down at one more meal I hadn't worked for, hadn't paid for, and hadn't earned, a life of debts I could never repay, pushing in on all sides like the weight of the sea, I blinked. A tear fell into my bowl. Would it always feel like this? Just as the moon rises up from the bottom of the sea, a handful of rice lifted itself from the bottom of my bowl and my heart rose with it and opened. I wish I could tell you how it tasted, that first bite of food as a free woman.

These are called the songs of enlightenment. There was a moment when, in that taste, all of a sudden all the things she thought she should be and who she was dropped away, and the vastness and mystery opened.

It happens that that vastness and mystery is who you are. You are consciousness itself that was born into that body of yours. Where do you think you came from? You're certainly not the physical body. As I say, you are not kale and Big Macs. It's just not who you are. And you're not your emotions, I hope—they're nice at times and terrible at others. And you're certainly not your thoughts. First of all, they come and disappear just like that. Which one is you? Spirit, consciousness, born into this body will leave this body. You'll see. It's going to happen sometime.

What a trip that was, that life, wasn't it? You'll see. I told you so, right?

And here you are in the middle of this mystery. You're in this mystery. What you are is consciousness, is spirit, having this human experience. And without understanding, you're like a boat without a rudder.

When you come to the temple, as you have, or you go to that forest monastery, it's really a place of reminder that what you're seeking is who you are, and where you're going is here—because there's only now. You can imagine other things, but actually all you have is what's now. It's always now. This is where we're going.

And so to remind you, amidst the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, you have the perfect place to awaken. You don't have to go to some forest monastery in the jungles of Thailand or Burma. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. You don't have to live in some cave. You have all the perfect conditions for awakening in your very own life, in your own body and mind. And when you do, then you can really care for the world in a whole different way.

This last weekend, I was teaching for Buddha Fest in Los Angeles, which was a big festival of Buddhist teachers and films and arts. But I was up here, unable to be there in person, and so I Skyped in to a dialogue with my beloved Trudy, my wife, who's a teacher inside LA, and with Ram Dass. There were hundreds of people there and thousands of people online, and we had about an hour-long conversation about awakening and loving awareness and what's possible for us. Because it's not in India. It's not in the jungles. It happens to be in your own heart.

As we came toward the end of that, Ram Dass told one of his favorite stories about how, when he was in India after some years with his guru, his guru was urging him to go back to the U.S. to teach and to offer these teachings. And Ram Dass demurred and said, "You know, I'm not ready. I'm too neurotic. I'm too impure. I'm too imperfect. How could I offer the teachings of love that you have embodied so much? How could I do that? I just feel too imperfect."

And his teacher got up off the little wooden bench where he sat and very slowly, taking a couple of minutes, walked around Ram Dass and peered at him from his feet to his head, looked in his clothes and looked in the back, peered at him all around. Then he sat back down and gazed at him and said, "I see no imperfections."

In India, it's called the glance of mercy. It's that love that happens when someone looks at you and sees the secret beauty that was born into you as a child—that's inviolable, that no one can take away—and recognizes your beauty.

So there we are, Ram Dass is talking about all these kinds of things, and then a woman raises her hand in the question period at the end. She says, "You know, Ram Dass, you had a guru. You went to India. Here I am in Los Angeles. What can I do?"

And I said to her, "You know, you're a little bit like the person sitting by the river asking for water." I said, "Ram Dass, can you see her in the camera?" I forget what her name was—it might have been Vivian or something. "Can you see Vivian?" "Yeah." I said, "Do you have anything to say to her?"

And he just looked at her and said, "I love you. I love you completely, just the way you are, exactly as you are." And then he looked at all of them and he said, "I love you all, every one of you." He was on a roll. He was loving everything by the time it was done. And you could see it and feel it in the group—it changed everybody.

Just to have somebody gaze at them with that much love and say, "Yes, I love you. And you are exactly as you should be—the universe has brought you here. You are completely lovable and worthy of love."

The Buddhist teachings begin with the phrase: "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are." Remember your fundamental dignity. Remember that you have the capacity for freedom, that within you is born the great heart of compassion. Trust it. Open to it. And then you can live with wisdom and bring your blessings to the world.

So, in honor of Ajahn Chah, I pass along these teachings.

Let's just sit for a moment. Be quiet.

You have the perfect conditions in your life for awakening the great heart of compassion. It is your birthright.

O nobly born, remember who you really are.

CHAPTER 17

The Art and Heart of Forgiveness

Jack Kornfield · 1h16

> *In this deeply moving talk, Jack Kornfield and Trudy Goodman explore forgiveness as one of the essential dimensions of the awakened heart, alongside compassion, loving-kindness, and joy. Drawing from the Dhammapada's teaching that "hatred never ends with hatred, but by love alone is healed," they examine what forgiveness truly means and how to practice it wisely.*
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> *Jack shares powerful stories including the GRIP program graduation at San Quentin, where formerly violent men and community members exchanged apologies, and the remarkable work of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela with South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He clarifies essential points: forgiveness does not condone harmful actions, it is primarily for oneself rather than the offender, it cannot be rushed but unfolds through grief and processing, and it requires not closing one's heart to another being.*
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> *Trudy Goodman offers her understanding of forgiveness as "learning to make peace with life when you didn't get something that you wanted" and shares Eve Ensler's creative approach of imagining her deceased father's acknowledgment. She emphasizes that until we can feel our grief, rage, and sorrow with self-compassion and equanimity—as Bhikkhu Anālayo did during his winter retreat on climate change—we cannot act effectively in the world. The evening concludes with a guided forgiveness meditation offering phrases for forgiving oneself, forgiving others, and asking for forgiveness, cultivating what the tradition calls the brahmavihāras—the divine abodes of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity.*

So please let yourself be settled. Find a way to sit and listen.

And if one were to ask, after the meditation that we just did, how do we live with loving awareness? The theme for this evening that Trudy and I want to talk about is forgiveness, which is one of the dimensions of the awakened heart, along with compassion and loving kindness and shared joy. It's really an expression of what it means to live with loving awareness.

So as you sit and listen, let it be a little bit of a meditation. That is to say, it can be a reflection or a contemplation in yourself of what seems helpful or true or useful to you, or a reminder of something you already know. And if it doesn't seem right, forget it. You're the one that has to live this, and nobody else has lived quite as weird a life as you have. So you might as well get used to it.

A question as we begin: How many of you have things that you would like to forgive yourself for? Notice almost every hand went up, except that one person who's fibbing—and they'll have to forgive themselves later. How many of you have things where it's like, okay, I probably should forgive somebody else? So now we're in it together. Here we are, human beings. This is part of being human.

We have all been betrayed. I won't ask you to raise your hands on that one. We've all been hurt. We've all been abandoned—sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, sometimes in small ways, but it still stings or hurts. And sometimes in this world, in really terrible ways, with lots of pain for us. Sometimes it's individual, and sometimes it's part of the collective pain that we suffer or undergo.

I was invited to give an address at the graduation of the GRIP program at San Quentin a few years ago—Guiding Rage into Power. It's run by my dear friend Jacques Verduin, who runs Insight Out there, and I'd been chair of that board at one point. There were one hundred plus men dressed in mortarboards and graduation gowns, and about three hundred guests—politicians, people from the state corrections department, mayors, and so forth—all there. The men stood up. It was so moving. They had a valedictorian who spoke on behalf of them all, about how they'd all been violent men and now took a pledge to never solve a difficulty or conflict with violence again, that they'd learned all these things from their anger management and mindfulness and yoga. They spoke in really eloquent ways.

I gave a little talk on the dignity of each person and the possibility of change and renewal. And then my good friend Luis Rodriguez, who was the poet laureate of Los Angeles, and who also ran for governor rather unsuccessfully—but anyway, he's a great poet whose book *La Vida Loca: My Gang Days in L.A.* he says proudly is the most stolen book in high school libraries across the country.

Luis was going to read a poem, and his poems are like bloodletting Mayan sacrifice—they're extraordinary. But he said, "I can't read my poem." Because these men had stood up and forsworn violence, and then the whole group had apologized, saying, "We have been violent men and we now want to apologize to you for all the suffering that we've caused to so many of you and your families."

He said, "I can't accept your apology without making one of my own." And then he paused and said, "Because most of you grew up in circumstances of poverty, of racism, of drugs, where you weren't protected, where you were hurt in so many ways, and we didn't take care of you. And so we here owe you a deep apology, as you have offered to us."

It was a really powerful moment. What is forgiveness, in small ways and in big ways? We need it because we're related to each other, like it or not.

There's a book by a Zen teacher, Koshin Paley Ellison. He writes: "At eighteen, I was on a bus in Colorado. I'd been studying Zen, and a warm-faced woman struck up a conversation with me. I started to talk about Buddhism and she was interested. She asked me which community I was affiliated with, and I said, 'I have a lot of teachers that I read, but I don't practice with any one community in particular.' 'Oh,' she said, 'you're a lone wolf.' 'Yes,' I nodded and smiled. She went on, 'You know what's interesting about lone wolves? They're sick. Wolves are pack animals and they often mate for life. So if you see a wolf by itself, there's actually something wrong with it.' I will always remember that conversation on the bus."

You understand what happened to him, what she's saying. This is the deal: we are related to one another, for better and for worse.

of the family members of people who'd been in the jungle for ten or twenty years. Here's your old mother, here's your cousin, your sister, your brother. Remember, you're still part of another big family. And it helped to lead to the peace process.

So, forgiveness. These are the words from the Dhammapada, from the Buddhist teaching:

Look how he abused me and beat me. Look how he threw me down and robbed me. Continue to live with such thoughts and you live in hate. Look how he abused me and beat me. Look how he threw me down and robbed me. Abandon such thoughts and live in love. In this world, hatred never ends with hatred. But by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

This isn't some petty thing that somebody did. He beat me, threw me down, robbed me. And yet it becomes critical for us as human beings. Without it, you have the Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics saying, "Your people marched through our neighborhood three hundred years ago and I'm never going to forget it." Or the Hutus and the Tutsis, or the Palestinians and the Israelis, or the Serbs and the Croats and the Bosnians. Somebody has to say, "It stops with me." Yes, this has happened. But instead of carrying the story, to actually realize that we have the capacity, the magnanimity of heart, to say yes, we can live with forgiveness. Like my teacher from Cambodia whose family was killed in the genocide, who became famous for walking the countryside, chanting loving-kindness and forgiveness for everyone that he met.

A woman I worked with was in the middle of a terrible divorce. We worked with the grief and the loss and the anger and all those things. The man she'd married, the one she was getting divorced from—it was one of those bad divorces. He'd hired a really aggressive lawyer and he was trying to keep all the money and keep all the kids, even though he was the one who had the affairs. It was tough. So of course I recommended that she get a kick-ass lawyer, which she did, thank you. But then one day, after we worked with the grief, she came in and said, "You know, I realized something. My husband is trying to turn the children against me. All these terrible things are happening. And I realized that I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children. I will not say a single thing that's bad about their father. I will just be silent about it. It will stop with me." You can feel the courage of this.

Now, the holidays are coming up. Ram Dass says, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." Kind of straightens you out very quickly. But it's one of the places where we might have some difficulty. It's a good place to work on forgiveness—another reason to be talking about it at this point.

It says in the Bhagavad Gita, "If you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can return love for hatred."

So what is forgiveness? How do we understand it? There are things we need to know in order to practice it wisely.

The first is that forgiveness does not condone what happened. It doesn't justify it in some way. In fact, the first thing you can do is say, "I will do everything I can to prevent this suffering from continuing—continuing to hurt me or someone else, to prevent this harm." So it's not like rolling over or saying it was okay. It was not okay. And you stand up for what really matters. And it doesn't mean you have to talk to somebody. You may or may not end up talking to them. Forgiveness is reclaiming your own heart.

I remember a person I worked with named Alvaro. When his father died, it was a big construction company that the family owned, and his brothers tried to get his share of the company. You know how it happens when somebody dies in families.

And it was nasty and it was really painful because they'd also been a close family. And finally he came in one day and he said, "I will stand up for myself. I will do what's needed to protect myself." And he did. He got a really good business partner who helped him do that. He said, "And I've learned that I can trust—and I can trust my brothers to be themselves. I now know who they are, but they're my family and I love them anyway."

And it was that difficulty that we have of holding the pain of something, but also recognizing often that we still love that person. Not that easy, but welcome to the human realm.

So the first thing about forgiveness is it doesn't condone. It says, in fact, that's wrong. I will do what I can to prevent the harm from continuing.

The second—and also noticing this—the second is *who* forgiveness is for. Guess who? As Miss Piggy would say, "*Moi*."

You may have noticed that when you sit in meditation, it's a little hard to control your own thoughts and mind. Have you noticed that? How about controlling others? How's that going for you?

So who forgiveness is for primarily is for oneself. The release of the burden. Not to be a hostage to the past, to what's happened. Not to be the victim of it. "Oh, he did this, she did that"—just what the Buddha was writing about. And then you live in that story as if that story were true. And the thing about the stories that we make up and then live in is they're kind of true. You know what I'm saying? And they're kind of not true. There are other sides to it.

It's like the two ex-prisoners of war who met years afterward, and one says, "Have you forgiven your captors?" And the other says, "No, never. They tortured us. All that happened." And the first one said, "Well, then they still have you in prison, don't they?"

Who is it for? It's for yourself.

And truthfully, the story that you have—if you were to let it go, who would you be without "they did me wrong"? It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's the place in between where we let go that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.

So here's a poem about story. It's just such a good poem. I needed to read it tonight. It's called "Little Movies," from my favorite poetry journal, which is called *Rattle*.

I'm telling my friend Charlotte that Barbara and I are going to go to New York, where I hope to not spend a whole lot of money in fancy restaurants. And Charlotte tells me she was just in New York herself but didn't spend much money on food because she was with a group of pregnant women. I can see them now as they decide between goat cheese salad

and the hummus, the hearts of palm and the orange glazed shrimp with spicy walnut crumble, as the waiter says, "Can I interest you ladies in a mimosa, a glass of Prosecco?" And they say, "No, not this time, maybe in a few months."

Barbara asked her hairdresser if she plans to have children. And the hairdresser says she's leaning the other way because she works on a lot of young mommies, and they're just not selling it. Then again, parenthood isn't about joy. Studies show that parents report significantly lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and mental well-being compared with non-parents.

Why do it then? Why have children at all? Probably because children add narrative to a life that doesn't have one, or add more narrative to a life that's actually pretty rich in narrative already, or seems as though it may never have a narrative at all.

Do you know that even aliens love stories?

The woman who claims to have interviewed the alien whose ship crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 said the creature's favorite books were *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Don Quixote*, and *A Thousand and One Nights*—all stories of great spirit and great power. Great images.

Tom Petty says a good song should give you a lot of images. You should be able to make up your own little movie in your head for a good song. And the same is true of stories.

A man had a peacock, says playwright Tom Stoppard, and the man was shaving one morning. In the mirror, he sees the peacock atop the garden wall, about to jump to the other side. So the man drops his razor and races out just as the bird reaches the motorway and starts to leg it to God knows where. He catches it after a hundred yards or so, puts the peacock under his arm, and starts home. So the story ends happily.

But in the meantime, a good half dozen cars have sped by, and their occupants have seen a man clad only in pajama pants, his face covered by shaving foam, carrying a peacock. What did they think? That the man had lost a bet on a rugby match, perhaps, and now has to walk from Whitby to Berwick-on-Tweed with the foam on his face and the bird under his arm? Or that he belongs to a cult religion that worships shaving, partial nudity, and peacocks, and he's on his annual pilgrimage? Or that he's been slipped a powerful drug by his wife's lover, who is sending the man out into the world this way so that he will appear deranged and spend the rest of his days in a care home while the two lovers squander the man's considerable fortune?

All lives end the same way. Between the start and the finish, it's the stories that count. We can be grateful for all these stories.

Charlotte laughs as she tells me about her pregnant friends, and I love thinking about all that life around the table. And then I ask Charlotte if she plans to have children, and she wags her finger at me as if to say, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I read this partly for the pleasure of it, because it's a good poem, but also to remind us that we make up so many stories about this world. My friend Roger Walsh—MD, PhD, on the faculty at Stanford Medical School—read the Encyclopedia of World Religions from Ahura Mazda all the way to Zoroaster. I said, "So what did you learn from this, Roger?" And he said, "All these religions have stories that they place upon the mystery." Birth stories, beginning stories, ending stories. Stories placed upon the mystery.

So when we forgive, we actually become more vulnerable in a way. Like Linus with the blanket in the dryer. We let ourselves open to something new that's not the old way, not the old holding on and the old belief of how it was, but open to another possibility.

Also, forgiveness can't be papered over. It's a process, often slow, with grief and rage and fear and blame and tears. The story I always tell is of the man who wrote to the IRS saying he was unable to sleep because he cheated on his taxes last year. So he enclosed an anonymous cashier's check for three thousand dollars. He said, "And if I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

It's pretty much how it works for us. You do a little forgiveness and you say, "Yeah, but I'm not really... I mean, they did it and I shouldn't..." And you can feel all that stuff inside. You know how it works. But little by little, there comes somehow a realization that it's good for you to forgive. Forget about them. They may or may not change at all. You can't make them different. But you tend your own heart.

There's a remarkable book I have here. Trudy and I were talking about it because she's going to be in Dharamsala in dialogue with the Dalai Lama in a couple of weeks. We were kind of wishing we could go. A woman named Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a South African psychologist, was one of the central people who helped run and organize the Truth and Reconciliation process there. This book is a record of her going into the toughest prison in South Africa and spending a year in conversation with the man who was most vilified as a killer on the side of keeping apartheid going, on the side of the Dutch white folks—a man named de Kock.

She spent a year trying to understand him. And in the course of it, she changed and he changed. It's a remarkable story. Here he is, he says: "I think that I lost... It's a feeling of loss. The first thing that goes is innocence."

I mean, there's no more fairy tales, no more Bambi. That's gone. We killed a lot of people—and he did it in terrible ways. And they killed some of ours.

And then he pauses.

"We fought for nothing. We fought each other, basically, eventually for nothing. We could have all been alive having a beer. And the politicians... If we could put all the politicians in the front lines with their families and grandparents and grandchildren—if they're in the front line, I don't think we'll ever have a war again. I think it's educated people, very educated people, who sit in Parliament and decide about war. So I'm confused. I'm very confused. I'm just tired."

De Kock shook his head, shifted his legs to adjust the position of the chains that bound him to his seat, his eyes downcast, looking like somebody reflecting on the greatest loss in his life.

And it's a remarkable thing to see somebody like Pumla go and say, "I'm going to go to the person that's most considered the evildoer in our culture and try to understand them, and in some way to be understood by them." You can feel the dignity and the nobility of it. But it's a process that was a whole year of her life.

And then finally, there's a kind of perspective that we have to carry. You know the Ojibwe saying: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." We are vulnerable human beings. It's true. The poet Rilke says, "Ultimately it's upon your vulnerability that you depend." And we depend on one another—to stop at red lights so we can go on the green, to drive on their side of the street, to be gracious in line at the store, to care for one another, to care for children who are lost. We depend on each other so much. And this is our human realm.

So the last piece is to not put another being out of your heart. Not to close your heart. And not for their sake. There they are—they might be having a vacation in Hawaii right now. They're on a beach in Kauai having a lovely time. "I hate them. I hate them." Who's suffering? But it's something very deep that's needed.

Another story. This is a story of a man who's in hospice, close to dying. And the hospice volunteer—a Zen hospice volunteer—asked him if he had any last wishes. He said, "I really want to see my daughter. I've been estranged from her for years, and that's the thing that I most want."

So the hospice volunteer took great effort, tracked the daughter down, emailed her, and then began to call her. The daughter didn't want to come back. And finally, after a long time—she kept saying, "I don't want to see him. I hate him. I'm glad he's dying"—she relented. "Okay, I'm not going to stay long, but I'll come."

The hospice volunteer was happy that she could aid a reconciliation. The day the daughter arrived, the volunteer was standing outside the door, looking to see what would happen. The daughter flew into the room. As soon as she got in, she looked at her father and said, "You're one of the most awful people I've ever known. You caused more harm to me than anyone I've ever met. I hate your guts." And then she turned around on her heel and left.

The hospice volunteer went into the room and said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know that was going to happen."

And the father responded, "That's exactly what I wanted to have happen."

The truth is, I was a terrible father. She's never had the opportunity to tell me to my face, and I knew it was eating her alive. I needed to let her say it.

So it doesn't go the way you think it should go, but it's really an act of mercy of your heart to say, "All right, I can do this. I can forgive in some way." And a lot of it is forgiving of yourself. We're so hard on ourselves, and we define our lives by our worst moment as if that's really the truth.

Or the society, which is one of a lot of blame—especially in our crazy criminal justice system, poverty, racist poverty prisons. Most incarcerated women, two-thirds, are in prison for nonviolent, low-level drug crimes or property crime. One of the first incarcerated women I ever met was a young mother who was serving a long prison sentence for writing checks to buy her three young children Christmas gifts without sufficient funds in her account. Like a character in a Victor Hugo novel, she tearfully explained her heartbreaking tale to me. I couldn't accept the truth of what she was saying until I checked her file and discovered that she had in fact been convicted and sentenced to over ten years in prison for writing five checks, including three to Toys "R" Us. None of the checks was for more than $150.

It could make you weep. And it also makes you weep because there's a way in which we want justice. There's something in us that knows what justice looks like, and we want something honorable. And we have to be honorable to ourselves as well—to forgive ourselves as well as forgive others.

In Hawaii, there is a temple on the coast of the Big Island called Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau, sometimes translated as the Temple of Refuge or the City of Refuge. These are big black lava stone walls on the beach with some little temple buildings inside and a whole courtyard. It's said that in the ancient Hawaiian culture, if you had broken a taboo, or you had done something that was illegal or terrible, if you could get yourself inside the walls of this city of forgiveness, this temple of forgiveness, you would be forgiven no matter what it was.

I remember the first time I went there, I found it very moving. I wondered, "Does this place still work? Could I be forgiven? Could you be forgiven? Could we be?" And what would it be like for us as a culture to build temples of forgiveness instead of the kind of crazy prison system or all the other things we do?

So it's both the collective peace that we want to awaken to—seeing that there's another way to live as humans—and then, of course, it starts most personally at home, in our own heart.

"Thank you, Jack. I really like listening to you teach."

"And I'm happy to be here as a guest at your sitting group. Jack comes and teaches at my sitting group in L.A. It's not quite this large—we have an intimate group of about a hundred that come on Sundays. It's a great pleasure to be here with you at Jack's group. I think of this as Jack's group, although I know every week there's somebody else teaching for the rest of the month.

"So yes, forgiveness. This is a topic very dear to my heart for my own life, for personal reasons, which I'll share with you in a bit. And I've really thought too about what it is. What does it mean to forgive? We all want to forgive because it's spiritual and nice. But forgiveness takes time, and it can sometimes take a long time. It just takes as long as it takes.

"The dictionary says forgiveness is giving up any thought of revenge or harm even when it's justified. That's the hard part, right? Because I have a right to be full of rage and entertain revenge fantasies and plot...

"My own definition of forgiveness is that it's learning to make peace with life when you didn't get something that you wanted. Another understanding is that there are ways to handle that experience of not getting what we want in our life besides becoming bitter about it.

"This might be a tasteless joke, but I'm going to go ahead anyway since I've started. Somebody said to me once, 'Do you know why cannibals never eat divorced people?'"

Because they're bitter.

I'm divorced, and I'm not bitter. But of course, I'm happily married now, and I'm going to tell you a story about that—the not being bitter story.

I think forgiveness is loving when we've been harmed or caused harm. It's that decision to love. It's how we love when we've been harmed or done harm—we love by forgiving. This is an activity of love.

I love this process, no matter how long it takes. Because when it happens—when we finally can let go of whatever grudges, whatever anger, whatever sorrow, whatever terror, whatever gets in the way of our being able to honestly and truly forgive ourselves or somebody else—when that happens, what floods in, when our hearts are freed from being caught in states of various kinds of ill will, what floods in are what we call the Brahma Viharas, the divine places that the heart can dwell. *Brahma* means heavenly or divine, and *Vihara* is dwelling place. And these are love and compassion and joy and equanimity. That's what floods in. So there's a real incentive to forgive in a genuine way.

I was going to tell a story about Pumla, and I'll just say that having read Desmond Tutu's book on forgiveness and having read about that whole time, it's such a story of hopefulness. When the ANC won and Nelson Mandela was elected president, South Africa had a real chance of becoming the next Rwanda, of really having a bloodbath that would have been a genocide. And because of the work—the incredibly hard work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Pumla was part of—it didn't happen. It's really important for us to look at examples of when something awful could have happened and didn't, particularly during a time when we feel so many awful things are happening.

What was necessary for the survivors of the violence, the people who had lost loved ones in the war in South Africa, was an acknowledgment—an acknowledgment of what had been done. And not even so much an apology, because how can you apologize for murdering somebody's family member? But an acknowledgment.

Sometimes we have to use our imagination. How can we forgive people who have no remorse for having hurt us? How can we forgive people who have passed away, who are gone? How can we forgive ourselves for not meeting our own expectations? How can we forgive things like racial bias or climate change? How can we forgive ourselves

for not having prevented that when we look into our grandchildren's eyes? How can we forgive ourselves for letting go of people in our lives that we really needed to hold close?

One story of using imagination in forgiveness that I read recently—I don't really recommend this book, it's a very hard read—is called *The Apology* by Eve Ensler. Some of you might have read it. Eve Ensler wrote *The Vagina Monologues*, which was a wonderful play of different women telling stories about their relationship with their—can we even say it? They say things like "down there" or all these euphemisms—with their vaginas. And it's funny, it's sad, it's poignant, it's beautiful actually. It can be life-changing too, just to hear women speak this way.

This was part of her own journey of healing as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. But it wasn't enough. She needed more. What she needed was an apology from her father who had sexually abused her for many years. But her father had passed away.

So what she did was just hard to imagine—such an act of creativity. She imagined what it was like to be her father, doing these things that he did to her. She really let herself inhabit his psyche completely, empathically, just describing what happened. And at the end of the book, she has her father—he doesn't really apologize in a beautiful way, he was not a beautiful guy—but what he did was acknowledge how much he had hurt her.

And she has him tell her how much he knows that he changed the course of her life and made it so much harder by the harm that he caused.

Now, this never happened, because he had already passed away. But she imagined it. And the power of the imagination was—and can be—so healing for us.

For many years, I worked as a psychotherapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about twenty-five years. We did a lot of psychotherapy through something called psychodrama, where we would take different parts and enact each other's stories and dramas. But what we could do in psychodrama that we can't always do in life is imagine a different ending for some of those stories. We could play out the way it had happened—that was the cause for needing therapy, so it was something painful. And then we could play out: what if that person had done something different? What if something different had happened?

I was a little skeptical at first. It's pretend. It's playing, it's pretend. But it's powerful.

About twenty-five or thirty years ago, when I was doing that kind of work, I was also meditating a lot. And I didn't really have the permission to use my imagination so much in meditation. I was following the instructions and kind of strictly sticking to them—not so free in that way.

But I want to encourage you in your meditation to feel free to use your imagination, to use your creativity. When you sit down to be with yourself and meditate, maybe you aren't going to just follow your breath that day. Maybe you're going to radiate some compassion to yourself or to somebody else. Maybe that's what's called for. And maybe one day you sit down and compassion is the farthest thing from your mind or what's even possible, and you're just going to sit with the breath and the sensations in the body and calm down a little bit. But having that freedom to ask: How is it? How is it for me today? What do I need? I want to encourage you. It's important.

And it also helps us in our daily life. Here's just a daily life story. Last night I couldn't find the little plastic thing my dentist made for me to put in my teeth at night. I couldn't find it anywhere, and I was so frustrated because I get up in the night sometimes and get a glass of water or have a snack, and I'm so careful about where I put it. But I'm at Jack's house—I live part-time in LA, of course, and we go back and forth—and I was looking everywhere, and so was Jack, and it was nowhere to be found.

But what was going on is that I was berating myself the whole time. "This is so expensive. You already lost one. How could you not be more careful?" And suddenly, mindfulness—yes, some loving awareness—actually happened and kicked in. Because when we have a practice, it does that. And when it kicked in, I thought, "Actually, I'm really careful with my binky"—I call it my binky—"I'm really careful with my binky. Where would I have put it carefully?" And instantly I knew. It was in the pocket of my fuzzy bathrobe.

The happiness that I felt! But really, it's a story about forgiveness, because the minute that activity of calling ourselves names and berating ourselves for being whatever it might be that we're not happy with—as soon as that stopped, it was just clear.

Recently—Jack knows, I've talked to him about this—I've been traveling and doing a retreat and going to a board meeting, just doing some travels and work. And in the course of these travels, just coincidentally, twice I found myself with people sequentially who could not get along with each other. In other words, a gathering with one person who was upset with another person who I saw later, or having lunch with one person, then coming to the place where the other person was.

This is two sets of people who have had forty or fifty year friendships. In one case, these are two people in their seventies who were friends since kindergarten. That's a long friendship. That's a lot of trust and affection over the years. And they are mad at each other. They've been mad at each other for three years.

I know what they're mad at each other about, and it's easy for me to say, how can you let a lifetime of trust and affection go down the drain simply because they said this that you didn't like, or they did that that you didn't like? It was not horrible. It was just inconsiderate. Or thoughtless. We're all like that sometimes.

But we do this, don't we? And we sometimes do it to children. "You lied to me. You're nine years old and you lied to me. You know better." Nine years of trust. Banished. Gone. "How can I ever trust you again?" We say these things sometimes when we're upset.

But that lifetime of trust and affection is so important. And I just want to encourage all of us to hold it carefully and tenderly, to remember where we've put it. When we wake up at night and the mind starts churning—she did, she said, he did, he said—it's possible to change the channel. It's possible for us to actually shift our attention. And I'm not talking about the big horrible abuse, or the person who harmed you the most in this lifetime, or betrayed you in the worst possible way. We have to do some grief work around losses and wounds like that. We have to. And around the losses and what's happening that we can't control.

Recently I sat a retreat with Bhikkhu Anālayo at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. He's a monk who practices very intensively. He spends five days a week in retreat, in silence, sitting all day. And actually, he sits down to meditate and he gets up seven and a half hours later to have lunch, take a shower, maybe rest a little bit. Then he sits down and gets up another seven and a half hours later. So if you think maybe it's long to sit for half an hour, you can think—I do—you can think of Bhikkhu Anālayo and his practice. And then he writes two days a week.

He said that his whole winter retreat—he does a hundred-day retreat in the wintertime—his whole winter retreat was focused on the grief and outrage that he feels about climate change. And he said it took him his entire retreat to be able to face the various possibilities, all of which are really difficult to face, especially if you're a parent or grandparent. All the possibilities, including the end of humanity. He went that far.

And he said until he could feel all the feelings of grief, of rage, the immense sorrow, the fear—all of those feelings—until he could feel them and be with them with some measure of self-compassion and equanimity, he knew there was really nothing effective that he would be able to do.

So this is another way that our practice is so important for us. The things that we want to change and that we want to help in the world—they can't be helped when we're coming at them with this huge charge of anger and outrage, or grief, or whatever it may be. For us to be able to muster the loving awareness and the internal balance to meet what's happening with some measure of compassion and equanimity is a way for us to be effective with each other, with those who don't share our views, listening to each other, learning what it's like to be each other.

So we can't forgive too early, as Jack was saying, until we've grieved the loss. I think that's the obstacle that most people encounter when trying to forgive. We also can't cry in rage forever. And we do calm down. And then we can remember that first of all, the only life that we can be happy in is the one we actually have. Not the one that's going to happen in the future maybe, or the one that we used to have, but this one, right here, right now. This one that we actually have.

And the most famous Stanford expert on forgiveness, Fred Luskin, says, "Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, look at all the love, beauty, and kindness around you."

Because forgiveness is about personal power.

And forgiveness is also heroic. It's noble. It takes an immense effort when something bad has happened. We can rewrite our memoir, rewrite our autobiography when we make that noble choice. And every time we do, we're actually moving our whole society more toward love. Because what we do for ourselves and our community, we're doing for both at the same time.

The last story I want to tell you is about forgiving my husband—the man I was married to before Jack. There were ten years in between, and it wasn't my first marriage, that one either. I seem to require ten years in between to recover, but then I start over again. I do assure Jack, and it's true, that he is my favorite of all my husbands.

There's been a lot of news recently about misconduct on the part of Buddhist teachers this past year, and it's painful news. It seems to come in waves every ten years when you've been doing this as long as we have. You can see that rhythm, and it's just so upsetting that it keeps happening, but it does. Some people are forced to step down. Some

move on and start another community somewhere else. Some do the incredibly hard work with integrity—a much harder path of sincere, committed work on themselves with an expert, specialized therapist. Taking responsibility and facing their history, they can emerge stronger and wiser.

In my case, my husband was a wonderful, gifted teacher, and actually still is, but he hit a really rough patch and, like some of the recent teachers, went off the path. It didn't happen while we were together. Even in a court of law, you're not required to blow the whistle on your own spouse. I didn't tell because I wanted him to be in recovery, and he was for a while.

Whatever we've done, we all want to be forgiven for our past mistakes, don't we? We've all made unwise choices. We've all needed forgiveness. And we all want to be seen and understood and known for the more overarching good of who we are, whether we're nine years old or ninety years old. That's what we want. We don't want to be judged forever for the past unwise choices or mistakes we made.

So this story: quite a number of years after our divorce—maybe eight or ten—my daughter invited my husband to come visit, and we met for the first time in all that time. We hadn't even spoken for ten years. It took me a long while to really feel forgiving of him. It didn't take as long for what I felt had happened to me, but more for our family—the extended family, the kids.

But this time, we just spent easygoing time together, taking care of the grandkids. We were actually babysitting, making dinner, and it just felt so familial, so familiar—being family together, gradually unburdening ourselves a little bit. There was a Sunday sitting group at InsightLA where we actually taught together that weekend. We decided we could do it after that Saturday night of just taking care of kids.

That morning of teaching together, we talked about loss and repair, because everybody's lost somebody and often without the chance to repair. We really opened it up and brought everybody into that experience. It was kind of beautiful, actually.

And what I saw was this: after ten years, after all the heartbreak, all the anguish—agony, actually, at times—what was left? What was there on the other side of that suffering? I think those of you who've gone through heartbreak of great magnitude and a lot of suffering know, if you've had time to heal...

and even time to forgive, you know what lies on the other side of that suffering.

And it's really just love. Love and humility. The humility of our shared humanness. And the love of these teachings that help us live better lives.

I don't know what I would have or could have done if I hadn't been practicing all these years. Because I have been, I don't know what the other life would look like. But I'm grateful, and I know you are too. And if you're new to this practice—keep going. Don't stop. Pick it up and keep going, even when you disappoint yourself and stop. You can still keep the intention to practice in the center of your life and come back to it, just like the Julia Child story. It's here, always waiting for us.

So we've all made plenty of mistakes in this life, and we will probably continue to do that. But through the grace of cultivating loving awareness, we can grow and strengthen our capacity for growth through practicing, and also this human capacity that we have for forgiveness and redemption.

What I would like to do now is lead a forgiveness meditation—a practice that can take us in the direction of forgiveness and redemption.

Please find a posture that you're comfortable in, because it's very hard to generate the intention to be compassionate and forgive if you're really uncomfortable. And we can forgive ourselves for getting distracted in meditation too. That moment of distraction and our noticing it is right there—the birth of our freedom.

Sitting comfortably, closing your eyes if that's comfortable for you in a large group, or just lowering your gaze if not. I like to begin this practice with forgiving ourselves, because without that it's really hard to genuinely forgive anybody else. How we do this together is I will say certain phrases that carry the intention to forgive and invite you to repeat them silently to yourself. All you have to do is listen to what you're saying to yourself and see if you can mean it too.

I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life. And that means for being a work in progress. We forgive ourselves for being in the process of learning how to do better.

I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.

And once again: *I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.*

In whatever ways I may have harmed myself, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive myself. For any way that I have abandoned myself, betrayed myself, my values, been less than who I know I can be—I forgive myself.

Taking a moment now, using whatever phrase speaks to you, resonates for you, that you need to hear. Just offering forgiveness to yourself. You can place a hand on your heart. Just offering some self-compassion, kindness, understanding, and love.

Then, when you feel ready, call to mind somebody you need to forgive—but please don't choose the person who has harmed you the most in this lifetime. Maybe start with somebody who has just annoyed you. The reason for that is simply time. It takes time to forgive, or it can.

Call to mind this being, and then we're going to offer the phrases to this one.

I forgive you for being imperfect. I forgive you for making mistakes. I forgive you for being a learner in this life.

And once again: *I forgive you for being imperfect. I forgive you for making mistakes. I forgive you for being a learner in this life.*

For whatever way you've hurt me, intentionally or unintentionally, I'm willing to forgive you. For whatever way you caused me harm, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you.

Again, using whatever phrase is right for you, spend another moment with this person to whom you are extending forgiveness.

And now I invite you to call to mind somebody that you have hurt.

Somebody whose feelings you hurt, somebody you overlooked. Again, not the most horrible thing you've ever done, but something that was hurtful to somebody. Call this person to mind, because we're going to ask for forgiveness.

Please forgive me for being imperfect. Please forgive me for making mistakes. Please forgive me for being a learner in this life.

For whatever way I may have intentionally or unintentionally hurt you, I ask your forgiveness. For whatever way I knowingly or unknowingly harmed you, please forgive me.

Just take a moment to say anything else you may need to say to this one.

And coming back to yourself for a moment. Once again: I forgive myself. I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.

And just as I forgive myself and others, may all beings find it in their hearts to free their hearts from ill will, resentment, grudges, revenge fantasies. May we and all beings free our hearts to forgive and find our way back to loving awareness.

Thank you, everybody, for your practice, for your presence, for your listening. Thank you for being here.

CHAPTER 18

Loving Witness Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 28 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a systematic opening to what he calls 'loving awareness' or the 'loving witness.' The practice begins with establishing a dignified yet relaxed posture, settling the body, and connecting with the natural rhythm of breath. Kornfield emphasizes that the breath breathes itself, inviting practitioners to sense their participation in the larger exchange of life with all beings through the shared ocean of air.*
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> *The meditation unfolds through progressive layers of awareness. Starting with breath as an anchor, practitioners learn to receive whatever arises—bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts—with the same quality of kind attention. A distinctive element of this practice is the invitation to greet each experience with gratitude, acknowledging pain or tension with 'thank you for protecting me' and pleasant sensations with equal appreciation. This approach transforms the relationship with difficult experiences, honoring the body's wisdom rather than fighting against it.*
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> *Kornfield guides practitioners to recognize their true nature as awareness itself—spacious, open, and fundamentally loving. Rather than identifying with the changing phenomena of breath, sensation, emotion, or thought, one rests as the witness to this 'arising and passing dance.' The meditation concludes by extending this loving awareness beyond the personal sphere to encompass all beings, taking one's seat of stillness amidst what Kornfield describes as 'the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows'—a reference to the full spectrum of human experience that loving awareness can hold.*

So please let yourself be settled in a way that you can sit for the next twenty-five minutes or so. Let your body be stable, sitting upright enough so there's a sense of alertness or presence, and also a graciousness—as if you're the king or the queen on your throne, at ease.

When you're ready, let your eyes close gently and begin to tune in. Take two or three long, deep breaths in and out as a way to center and release what's present, any tension you're holding. And bring a kind attention to your body. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body and the connection with the seat—your bottom or your feet—and the heaviness of your body being met fully by the chair, the earth, the floor. For this time, you can rest on the earth and she will support you just where you are. Let your belly be soft and your breath natural. Let your heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, compassion.

And now, with this embodied awareness, in whatever way feels right to you, let yourself sense how your body is breathing. It breathes itself. You might feel the whole body breathing the ocean of air that we share with all the other living creatures of this planet, breathing in and out, exchanging the oxygen and carbon dioxide with the leaves of the trees and the grasses and all the beings around you. Or maybe you'll feel the breath as coolness in the back of the throat, swirling and tingling, or coolness in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to sense the breath, you can place one hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall gently in the palm of your hand.

This is a first invitation for mindful loving awareness: to let the body settle, let the breath breathe itself. And even if there's a background of pain or trauma that's carried in your body, be spacious and loving, feeling that in this moment there is a sense of presence and care that you can bring to yourself. Rest your attention as best as you can, gently and easily, feeling how the body breathes itself, one breath at a time—in breath and out, rising and falling, expanding and contracting. You are a living, breathing being.

With each breath, let the breathing and the awareness of this breath be an invitation for settling, for calm and ease to grow. Sometimes people even use a soft word with each breath: in, and out—ease, calm.

And of course there will be waves of thoughts and memories and plans, of emotions and other sensations. Let them rise and fall around this breathing, around each breath that you take. Let the sense of breath help settle and steady the mind and body together. Let all the other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around this breath, and this one, around each breath.

And notice, as you feel the breath, as you're aware of the waves that arise around the breath, that who you are is not this breath or this body. You are the loving awareness, the loving witness. You are consciousness itself—open, spacious—letting the breath breathe itself and the experiences rise and fall within a field of loving awareness. Become the loving awareness itself. You are the kind witness.

As you quiet with the breath, let yourself settle with increasing calm and tenderness of heart. You'll notice that there are some strong sensations from the body that call your attention, that pull your awareness away from the breath: tingling or pleasure, pain, throbbing, vibration, warmth, cool, areas of trauma held in the body, areas of pleasure and delight in the body.

When a bodily experience from this precious human body becomes strong, receive it with the same loving awareness you've given to the breath. Let go of the breath as the focus. And as if to bow to it, you can name it gently and say, "Thank you." If it's pleasure: thank you. If it's tingling: thank you. If it's cold or hot: thank you for telling me. If it's trauma and tightness: thank you for protecting me.

You become the loving witness to the body. And the body shows you all that it holds, how much it's cared for you through everything. Whatever it shows you, you receive with loving awareness. You witness and say, "Thank you. Thank you for keeping on." And then feel the breath behind it all.

Just as waves of bodily experience will arise as you sit quietly sensing your breath, so too emotions and feelings will arise like waves of the ocean: sadness, longing, excitement, joy, fear, anxiety, love. When a strong wave of feeling arises, as if to bow to it, receive it with the same loving awareness. You are the loving witness.

You can name it gently—*sad, sad,* or *longing,* or *joy, joy, happy.* And whatever the feeling is that you name, let it rise and say, thank you. Thank you for letting me feel so much, so deeply.

When the feelings pass, you can return again to the breath for a time. You are the loving witness to this breath, to these sensations, to these moods and emotions. Life living through you.

Just as the breath arises and passes. Just as sensations float and change—painful and pleasurable—one after another, arising and passing in their time. Just as emotions and feelings rise and fall like waves of the ocean, and you are the loving witness.

Let yourself also be aware of the waves of thoughts. Picture thoughts and word thoughts arise and fall around the breath—planning, remembering, trying to take care of things, trying to keep you safe and protect you, trying to understand, guide, navigate. And when the waves of thoughts are strong, you can name them gently, as if to bow to them all. *Planning. Thinking. Remembering. Envisioning. Figuring.* As if to bow to them, naming them and say, thank you. Thank you for trying to take care of me and protect me. I'm okay just now. You can relax.

And when it's quiet, return back to the breathing. You are mindful loving awareness itself. The loving witness that notices the arising and passing dance. And you are open and silent.

And finally, let the sense of loving awareness extend beyond this body and feelings and thoughts to become the loving witness of all that's around you. The joys and sorrows. You are the loving witness. You are the awareness itself—loving and compassionate, spacious. Amidst the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, you take your seat of stillness as loving awareness itself.

CHAPTER 19

Loving Witness

Jack Kornfield · 45 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Jack Kornfield offers guidance on cultivating loving awareness as a way of navigating our challenging times—from climate change and pandemics to personal struggles and global conflicts. Drawing on the story of the Buddha's encounter with Māra on the night of his enlightenment, Kornfield illustrates how difficulties arise not just once but repeatedly throughout our lives, and how we can meet them with the same spacious, caring presence the Buddha demonstrated.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together profound teachings with moving stories: the tale of Lee Horton, who after 25 years of wrongful imprisonment emerged to find extraordinary beauty in standing in line at the DMV; Ram Dass's encounter with a state trooper while on LSD, seeing Krishna in the blue light; and the parable of the rabbi who told dying monks that the Messiah was among them, transforming their community through mutual respect. These stories illuminate how shifting our identity from being caught in struggle to resting as loving awareness itself changes everything.*
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> *The practical invitation is simple yet transformative: even three minutes of sacred pause can shift our perspective from fear and grasping to spacious witnessing. Kornfield emphasizes that this isn't about escaping the world's difficulties but about engaging with them from a place of centered wisdom. When we become the loving witness, we can hold both the unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears that comprise human existence. From this ground of awareness, we naturally respond with compassion—tending to what matters, serving where we can, and moving through this dusty world with an open heart.*

So tonight I'd like to extend the teachings of our meditation on becoming the loving witness, the loving awareness, and talk about how we can manage ourselves, especially in these very challenging times.

At the end of our annual three-month retreat that we started some forty years ago on the East Coast at our center at Insight Meditation Society, we used to take a week at the end that we called integration week—to get people who had been silent for a long time prepared to go back into the complexity of their ordinary lives. We would show movies sometimes, and I remember renting this black and white documentary of a whole succession of speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King. Very, very moving. He would get up and begin to speak, and this incredible oratory would come out of him with so

much vision and heart. He was really like a prophetic voice. And when he finished, sometimes he would fall back into the arms of the people around him, as if he had become a channel for something great—which was true.

I remember, as we all do, that famous statement where he said the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. I think of it in these times because they are difficult times. It's hard to witness and feel what's happening in Afghanistan—because it's part of us. It's hard with the newly released UN climate change report. We've known it, and yet it comes into our bodies and our spirits. It's hard with the pandemic and the delta variant. There are emotional responses of being worried or exhausted or languishing, or for some of us, grief and loss.

And how are we going to fix all of this? We better hurry up. Things are difficult.

I think of the story of a young, ardent man who came to a great Zen monastery and found the master and said, "I want to come in and practice. In this world, there's nothing I want more than enlightenment." The master nodded. The young man said, "If I really applied myself, if I practice, how long will it take me to get enlightened?" The master smiled back and said, "Give me ten years." The young man said, "But wait—I'm really on fire. If I'm really ardent and do it, then how long?" The master looked back and said, "In your case, probably twenty years." The man got agitated and upset. He said, "Why did you raise it from ten to twenty? I told you I would really do it." And the master said, "Yeah, in your case, maybe even thirty years."

What can you take from this story? Where are we going? What will we find when we get there? Some kind of promised land in the future?

With everything that's happening in the world and in our lives, should we be optimistic or pessimistic? The pessimists among us look out and see the suffering in Afghanistan and the struggle as the Taliban has taken over—people trying to get out, the loss of freedoms, particularly the vulnerability of the women, and so many more things. The pessimists look at Syria and South Sudan and Myanmar and the rainforests in Brazil and in parts of the US that are losing so much. So much vulnerability, so many different forms of suffering. It's heartbreaking the way people mistreat each other. And if you look into the Buddhist texts in the cosmological sections, there are descriptions of the ends of empire on the earth with increasing disasters and shorter lives, natural disasters and human-made disasters. It's enough to make a pessimist out of almost anyone.

But then there's the optimistic side. This is not just a time of change in our lives, dear friends. It is really a time of transformation. If nothing else, the pandemic and climate change and the calls for racial and economic justice are showing us how completely in-

terconnected we are. The young people in the world see it and know it. The great majority of the population of Africa and parts of India and China are young people, and they're filled with passion and hope for the future. There are all these possible breakthroughs in fusion power, medicine, agriculture—all kinds of human possibilities. And we are survivors. We've not only survived as human beings; we've taken difficulty and then made new leaps out of it.

So which is it? The poet Rilke calls it this life that faces both ways. Both ways. Because if you look really honestly, whether it's optimism or pessimism, you realize that they're only thoughts. They're only ideas. They're not the reality. We don't know, actually.

These are just views. And people who cling to their views, said the Buddha on many different occasions—those who are free let go of their views, and those who cling to their views move through the world annoying other people. It's one of my favorite little passages from the Buddha. And you know it, people who are really attached to the way they believe things should be.

But here we are, in this time, and it's not an easy time. We look back at the story that's told of the Buddha's enlightenment—seeking liberation, freedom, awakening. He took his seat under the Bodhi tree, the tree of enlightenment, and through that last night before enlightenment tried to steady his heart and quiet his mind and see deeply.

And as he did, as the story is told, Mara appeared. Mara is the name in Indian mythology of the god or being, the archetype, who represents all the difficulties of the world. And Mara came in many different forms.

As the Buddha sat there—and you've all heard this story—Mara arose first as temptations. Desires and needs, showing the Buddha all the things that he could have: Mara's most beautiful daughters, the most amazing food, all the possibilities. Don't you want something? All the things that we could want. And the Buddha sat and said, "I see you, Mara." With loving awareness, he became the witness to Mara appearing.

And Mara got frustrated and sent what are called the armies of Mara. There are these paintings and depictions of flaming arrows and swords and all of the armies of aggression and anger, seeking to knock the Buddha off his seat. And as it's painted, the Buddha holds up his hand—you see a line from his fingertips going to his heart—and he touches each of the arrows and swords and spears as they come to him with the touch of compassion, and they turn into flower petals and fall at his feet.

And finally the Buddha sits quietly, and then Mara comes in the last form—the form of doubt. Self-doubt, doubt in the whole process. "Who do you think you are? What do you think you're doing? What do you think is possible? This world is the way that it is. There's no way for you to find freedom."

And again, finally, the Buddha touches the earth and says, "The earth is my witness. I've sat under this tree. I have practiced and practiced and practiced for this moment, to be present for it all. And I have no doubt." And the earth washed away the armies of Mara, and the doubt disappeared, and the Buddha's heart and mind became absolutely silent.

As the morning star was ready to set, the Buddha saw that all things are impermanent, that all things arise like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. He saw the evanescence of all things and found that the freedom was not to cling to any—to escape the snares of the king of death. As he said in a conversation later with Mogharāja on how not to be seen by the king of death: not to hold on to a single thing, to claim none of it as me or mine or identify with it. And instead, he became silent awareness itself, the witness to all things—both the vast stillness and the freedom beyond the whole sense of identity. He became freedom itself.

Now, the interesting thing in my experience as a teacher all these decades is that when I've led retreats—whether in Baltimore or Indonesia, Tucson or Switzerland, all these places around the world—one of the big surprises for people is that Mara appears everywhere. You sit down, minding your own business. "Okay, I'm going to sit and meditate, make myself calm and steady, see with clarity, bring compassion." And who appears? Guess who? Well, it's Mara again. Mara finds you wherever you go.

In fact, even after the Buddha's night of enlightenment, when you read the texts in the history, Mara kept coming back—fifty times Mara reappeared, testing the Buddha. And each time he would say, "Oh, Mara, is that you?"

Thich Nhat Hanh writes this beautiful account of the Buddha seated in a cave, quietly meditating, with his attendant Ānanda outside. And Mara—sometimes translated as "the evil one"—appears and begins to ask Ānanda, "I want to see the Buddha." And Ānanda says, "He's not here." And the Buddha hears the conversation and says, "Ānanda, is that my old friend Mara come round again?" And Ānanda didn't want Mara to come in, but he had to answer, "Yes, it is." And the Buddha said, "Set out a table. Let us have tea together."

And he invited Mara to tea. He said, "How is it going, Mara? How is it being the evil one?" Mara shook his head and said, "It's really tough. People hate me. I have a really hard job, inspiring everybody toward aggression and temptations and so forth." The Buddha was quite sympathetic and compassionate. He said, "You know, it's not even that easy being a Buddha, Mara. People distort my teachings. They want things from me that I can't do. They have all these imaginations and fantasies that they put on me."

We both have tough jobs, don't we, Mara? Take some tea, Mara. I'll see you when you come back again.

So here we are, dear friends. We got ourselves in trouble, which is called the human incarnation. What Zorba the Greek called "the whole catastrophe." We got ourselves a life that has birth and death, praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow—the life of opposites. We got ourselves born into a world of unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears.

Take a breath.

Here we sit together to meditate, to become the loving witness, the loving awareness. It's so mysterious. We don't know quite how we got here, and we're only here for a short while, a brief while. The ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, praise and blame, gain and loss—they rise and fall in this human incarnation, ceaselessly.

So how do we live? How do we live wisely?

In any moment, you can become the loving witness. You can become loving awareness. It's why we sit in meditation. It's why we train—not to have a particular special amazing experience and hold your breath and hope it will last, but to sit with heartbreak and love and longing and fear and loneliness and sweetness and tenderness and anger. To step back. To put on that little half smile that Thich Nhat Hanh recommends as we meditate, the one you see on all those images and statues of the Buddha. To say, as Ajahn Chah, my teacher, used to say, "Oh, it's like this." Whatever arises—fear is like this. Loneliness is like this. Longing is like this. Hope is like this. We become the loving witness of it all. Spacious, caring, wise.

Now, you will be tried. Here we are with the spread of the Delta variant. People desperately, our children desperately needing to be back in school, even with masks. People wanting to go back to work. The flood of refugees as the oceans rise, as the temperature changes with climate change. The people around who don't vaccinate, the propaganda and untruth that spread around the world. You become the loving witness to all of that, yes.

And yet, it's also midsummer here in the northern hemisphere anyway. And the fruit is ripening. And the blueberries are sweet. And the blackberries hang heavy on the vine. I just recently went to a friend's house who had this amazing mulberry tree with these huge, long, sweet mulberries. And then the organic strawberries at our farmer's market, and five varieties of peaches, pluots and plums. What an amazing earth that brings us this bounty! How do we respond? What channel do you turn to amidst it all—amidst the joys and beauty and the sorrows?

This from Lee Horton. Among the two million people in our criminal justice system, he and his brother Dennis spent twenty-five years behind bars, accused of robbery and murder, sentenced to life without parole. They always maintained their innocence. And this year, after being locked up for a quarter of a century, their case was reviewed finally, and they were granted clemency.

He talked about how amazing it was to come out and not have handcuffs put on him when he was in a car. And he said, "When they take everything away from you, I came out into this world and everything becomes beautiful." He continued, "When we got out, just to tell you a story—me, my brother, and another man who was commuted went to the DMV a couple of days later to get our driver's licenses back. We stood in line for two and a half hours, and we'd heard all the stories that everybody tells about the bad things about the DMV. We had the most beautiful time. And all the people were looking at us because we were smiling and we were laughing and they couldn't understand why we were so happy. It was just that—just being in line, standing at the DMV was a beautiful thing."

It was wonderful. I was in awe of everything around me. The things everyone takes for granted become the best things in the world for you. Having an onion just to cook your food becomes priceless.

He goes on and on about this. What channel will we choose? Because the world offers herself to us with an ocean of tears and its unbearable beauty every day.

Now, when I speak about Lee Horton, I think about my close and beloved relationship with Ram Dass—colleague, friend, teacher, inspiration. He tells a story from years ago when he was living at Millbrook in upstate New York. At that time, he was still in the Richard Alpert mode. He and Tim Leary had been kicked out of Harvard for giving LSD to undergraduate students, and he was going around talking about the psychedelic revolution and enacting it as they did at Millbrook.

He tells the story of dropping some acid, and then he needed to go somewhere—to the market or something. So he got in his big old car and got on the road, whatever it was, Route 9 that went near Millbrook. He started to drive along, and all of a sudden behind him he saw this flashing blue light from a police car. He knew enough, even though he was tripping, to pull over.

And this officer got out of the car with the blue light and walked over to him wearing a blue uniform. The state trooper. Ram Dass said, "I saw the blue light, and it was the same blue light that surrounds Krishna." When you look at all the beautiful images from India, especially baby Krishna, Krishna is surrounded by blue light. "And I saw this blue light come, and I knew it was the God Krishna who had stopped and come to visit me."

The officer came and Ram Dass lowered his window. He said, "I would have given him anything. This is a visit from God. What do you want?" And the officer said, "I want to see your license and registration."

So Ram Dass gave him his license and registration. "He thought," said Ram Dass, "that he was a state trooper, but I knew who he really was. I knew he was God." The officer gave him his license and registration back and told him that he'd been driving far too slowly. Apparently he was going twenty miles an hour on this highway, or fifteen. And then the officer looked at him so kindly and said, "Go on your way now, but make sure to pay better attention."

Ram Dass said, "And I got these teachings from God."

What channel do we tune in? There's something mysterious about this world, something amazing. It presents itself, and with mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, like Lee Horton, we can see it all anew—like the child of the spirit that was born in you. It's still there, underneath it all, to see with the eyes of amazement.

Mary Oliver's famous lines: "And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and sisterhood, and I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular. And each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth. When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement."

What a line. Married to amazement. And it is amazing. Take a breath. Remember.

And when we see with amazement, with loving awareness, we also see with the heart. Do you remember the story that I've told from past years about the rabbi in the woods?

It turns out that sometime long ago, there had been a great order of monastics, and all of these monastics who had spread out across the Christian lands had created temples of meditation and contemplation and prayer. But over the years, as modernization happened, the temples started to close and die out. People were less interested in going into monasteries. And so finally there was only one main mother house, one place where a handful of monks remained. There were only six of them left, and they were all in their seventies. They were a dying order.

It turned out that near the monastery there was also a special retreat center for the master rabbi, the mystic of that area from the Jewish tradition. And because the monks were quiet and listened, they could sometimes tell when the rabbi came into the woods.

They became despondent as everything was dying out, and they said, "Maybe we should send someone—our abbot—to go speak with the rabbi. He can give us some advice. Maybe he can help us, or at least understand us."

So the abbot went to the hut of this mystic and told him about the loss of so many other monasteries, and how now there was just this small group of them left. The rabbi kindly commiserated and said, "Yes, in these times, it's very difficult." And they sat down and prayed together. They read from the Torah. They read from their scriptures. They felt it was wonderful to see one another in this time and place, no matter what happens.

Have you no advice for us? the abbot asked the rabbi. He said, No, I really have no advice. But I have a vision that came to me, which I don't understand—that somehow the Messiah is with you. Maybe even one of you.

So the abbot of the old monastery went back. He pondered on what the rabbi had said. And he told the other monks when they asked, What did he say? He said, The Messiah is one of us.

And in the months that followed, they all pondered these words. What could that mean? Could he have meant one of the monks here? The Abbot? If he meant anyone, probably Father Abbot. He's been our leader for a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod. Elrod gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's sides, when you look back at it, Elrod is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi meant Brother Elrod.

But surely not Brother Philip. Philip's so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did. Suppose I am the Messiah. Oh God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?

And as they contemplated in this manner over the weeks and months, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest where it was situated was beautiful, it happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery—to picnic on its lawn and wander some of the paths and go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of this place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it. And hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently—to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought their friends.

And then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. Sensing their beautiful respect and care for everything, after a while one asked if he could join. And then another, and another. And so within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order, thanks to the rabbi's gift. A vibrant center of life and beauty had arisen from the gift of reminding the monks who they really are.

What does it mean in this mystery to treat ourselves with that kind of respect, to treat one another with that kind of respect?

Now, one of the concerns I hear from my colleagues, out there in the spiritual industry—so to speak, of which I am a part, embedded into the spiritual industry thing, which I can kind of look at now with some amusement and loving awareness—is the ruin of the loss of depth of what the tradition has. We had two-month retreats at Spirit Rock and three-month retreats at IMS and year-long trainings, monastic trainings that used to be so common in Thailand and Burma, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, where we received these beautiful teachings.

But more often than not, people are doing very short retreats. They've shrunk from three months and two months to ten days or a week or a weekend. And there's a certain loss of depth that happens. There's something amazing when you can come for ten days or longer and be silent, sit with your own body and heart and mind. Things open up. You can't even imagine if you've never done it. It's powerful and difficult at first, and amazingly beautiful.

And we see people at the end of retreats, and we like to talk about the meditative facelift. The Vipassana facelift.

Because people's eyes are shining at the end. There's a kind of smile and openness that's so beautiful to see.

But instead, now meditation has gotten shortened from one hour to thirty minutes or twenty minutes. And now I'm seeing the call for three-minute meditations. At the same time, some of the modern neuroscience coming out says that three minutes does a lot. If in your day you can take a few times for this sacred pause—this moment where you stop for three minutes and quiet and become the loving witness. "Oh, here I am caught up in this process at work. Here I am having to deal with this in my family. Here I am cooking, exercising. Here I am in the middle of paying my bills or caring for my garden or answering emails or watching the news." Let me take a moment—three minutes, one minute—to pause and step back and become the loving witness of life. Rest as loving awareness and say, "Well, this day, this moment with its joys and its sorrows, this is what I have to hold. This is the life I can give."

And in just a few breaths, our identity shifts from being caught in the difficulties and the struggles, the ambitions and problem-solving, the plans and memories and emotions—all those things we get identified with—to loving awareness. "Wow, look at this day! Look at this!" Like Lee Horton: "Look at this amazing day! Look at this line in the DMV! Wow, look at the berries and the summer fruit in a supermarket that has more food than any empire, any emperor or empress in previous thousands of years, would have had." What you have in your local supermarket would astonish them. Take some breaths and look at it all with the eyes of wisdom and a loving heart. Become that loving awareness itself. This is what you can do.

This is really the invitation to freedom. Yes, Mara will come, and you can say, "Oh Mara, is that you? I see you." But it's never too late to see with the eyes of mercy, to start anew exactly where you are—because where you are is always the place of freedom, again and again the invitation.

From the Tao: "I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures. Simple in actions and thoughts, you return to the source of being. Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate toward yourself, you reconcile with all beings in the world."

When you learn to sit in the midst of it, when you learn to say, "Oh Mara, is that you? I see you," when you learn to step back and become the loving awareness itself, the loving witness—then you become a model of how to live in this magnificent and troubled human incarnation. You bring your heart to what matters. And it's so clear: when people are hungry—I think it was the Pope who said—when there are people who are hungry, you pray for the hungry, and then you feed them. That's real prayer.

And where you go, you sow seeds of respect. You tend the neighborhood. You walk through this dusty world, as it's called, as the Buddha did for forty-five years, and you tend the garden of this world with your loving heart, with your stillness. You become the loving awareness itself that's not caught up and frightened and grasping.

For me, I'm on a lot of boards now—I think seven or eight boards of incredible organizations working with refugees, climate boards, the Regeneration Board of Paul Hawken that's extraordinary, education boards, the board of Partners Asia working with all the heartbreaking situations happening in Burma and Myanmar and countries around there—so many different organizations. And the people involved are so goodhearted. Part of what I bring—yes, I give money, I help connect people, I offer my own visions—but a lot of it as an elder is to sit in the seat of loving awareness and say, "Yes, we've been through this before. Yes, we human beings have suffered wars and environmental disasters, earthquakes and typhoons and tornadoes and pandemics in the past. And we know how to do this. We know how to hold hands. We know how to keep our hearts steady and calm. We know how to see that we're woven together in this mystery." And then we can respond. We can respond not with our fear or our ambition, not with optimism or pessimism—both of which are just ideas. We can respond with the heart.

I want to read you one more story, just to give you a sense of how playful you can be even in the midst of difficulty. And I've seen it. When those who are wise, those who meditate as we do and learn to center yourself—as the Tao said, to sit in that center of patience and simplicity and, more than anything, of love, of being the loving witness—then you get up and you work. You give your money, you join the organization, you tend the garden, you pick something that you care about. It's not your job to pick them all, but to pick one of them at least and offer your gifts and your service and your help.

"I'm ninety-two years old. I get up every morning at seven a.m. Each day I remind myself: wake up, get up. I talk to my legs. 'Legs, get moving. Legs, you're an antelope.'"

It's a matter of mind over matter when you're in your nineties. You have to get the spirit right. And I'm out on the street at 7:30 a.m. sharp, wearing my Honorable Sanitation Commissioner badge they gave me from City Hall. I'm alert. I'm ready. I've got my whistle.

My job is to help get parked cars off the street so they can bring in the sanitation trucks and the Wayne Broom—the big one, thirty grand for a broom. So when they show up, I go around blowing my whistle to get people to move their cars. I have a great time.

People are asleep. They're busy with business. They're busy taking time off from their business. They're busy having a good time. They're busy not having a good time. Whatever. I don't care. I blow my whistle. I'm all over the place.

I don't discriminate either. I go after the sanitation men too. The union got them a coffee break. Some coffee break. They're having eggs. They're having bacon. They're having toast. They're having French toast. I kid them about it. I go right into the restaurant and I blow my whistle. They love it. They understand. Everybody loves it. Everybody understands. It's the whistle that gets them. Sometimes I'm having such a laugh I can't even blow it. And then I get back to work. "Schleppers, get moving! Let's go move those cars."

This used to be such a beautiful city. People cared. If you didn't pay your rent, the sheriff would come and put your furniture out on the street. But the poorest of the poor would come out automatically and drop their pennies and nickels at your house and put you back into your apartment. That's neighborhood.

Now, sadly, it's different. Things have gone out of kilter. Hard to say why. People seem to be lost in their own lives. I see them on the streets, lost in their own thoughts. Not that I'm all that different myself. I'm a schlep myself. I've had many bad habits, as many as anyone. You should see my apartment—it's a mess. Me, Mr. Clean. But I'm trying.

Let's try. It's all possible. What can I tell you? I'm not a saint or a wise man. I'm not the two-thousand-year-old man. I'm only the ninety-two-year-old man, just a senior citizen.

But what do I know that everybody else doesn't know? We know. I just go out there in the morning and blow my whistle. That's what I do. And you do what you do. And me, I'm having a great time, a wonderful time. And when people see how much fun I'm having, they have to laugh. What else can they do? And then I hit them with it: Move your car.

I never met him, but I love his story. And it tells me something—and maybe you as well—that it's one thing to get caught up in our lives, as he describes in his own way. And then it's another thing entirely to realize that we do have a choice. A choice of which spirit, which channel we tune into. We can be the loving witness, the loving awareness. And then we can engage from that place in the world, with joy and openness, in spite of it all.

What better to do? What better? What better could we do with this life, with this mysterious incarnation?

Thank you, my friends. Thank you for listening. I'm so grateful. You know, when I give these talks, I give them as a kind of reminder for you. But you know who else I'm reminding, don't you? As Miss Piggy would say: moi. This one here. These are ways that I remind myself to go out in the street with my whistle—or whatever I do as a meditation teacher. Instead of a whistle, I have my bell.

So thank you for listening. Thank you for your good hearts. Thank you that we get to remember together the spirit that's possible.

CHAPTER 20

Forgiving Heart Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 25 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a gentle journey from breath awareness to loving-kindness (mettā). Beginning with the invitation to sit "halfway between heaven and earth," he establishes a foundation of embodied presence—softening the face, releasing the shoulders, and feeling the earth's complete support beneath us. The breath becomes a doorway to stillness, with the reminder that each inhale connects us to the living field of all beings.*
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> *Kornfield introduces a compassionate approach to working with the wandering mind, using the now-classic analogy of training a puppy—returning attention again and again without judgment or harshness. He offers the practice of acknowledging whatever arises with a simple "thank you"—whether planning, remembering, worrying, or joy—before gently returning to the breath. This approach transforms potential frustration into an opportunity for kindness.*
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> *The meditation gradually deepens into what Kornfield calls "loving awareness"—becoming the witness that holds all experience with tenderness. Drawing on teachings from Thích Nhất Hạnh, he suggests using the words "ease" and "calm" as gentle supports. The practice culminates in radiating mettā outward in all directions, like a lighthouse beacon, wishing peace and well-being for all beings everywhere. This meditation offers a beautiful integration of samatha (calm abiding), sati (mindfulness), and mettā practice accessible to both beginners and experienced practitioners.*

Find a way to sit that's comfortable and stable, where there's a sense of both upright alertness and graciousness or ease. Take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this mysterious human incarnation, sitting under your own tree of enlightenment for this time. Begin to pay attention in a deep and quiet way.

Let your eyes close gently. First, take two or three long, slow breaths to release whatever is obvious that you're holding. Bring your caring attention to your own body as you sit here halfway between heaven and earth.

Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Relax your shoulders. Let your arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on your seat, your chair, your cushion, your feet. Notice how the earth beneath you completely supports you. You can relax just here and feel this support just where you are. Let your belly be soft and your breath natural. Let your heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and tenderness.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice how the body breathes itself—this mysterious inter-breathing with the ocean of air around us. Each breath you take in was breathed recently by those nearby, by the birds flying overhead and the worms in the soil. We're exchanging our breath of life with the rest of the living field of this earth.

Simply sense wherever you can—coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat. Sense this breath, the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's at all difficult to feel, put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand as you meditate. If it's helpful, with each breath you can whisper in the back of your mind: ease, calm. These words, suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh, invite the breathing to open you to quiet and center. Each simple breath.

Naturally, the attention will wander. When you notice the attention has wandered off—as soon as you're aware of it, ten seconds or two minutes later, it doesn't matter—as soon as you wake up, you recognize: oh yes, here, seated, breathing mindfully. As if to bow, acknowledge that you've been away and gently come back to the very next breath. It's this returning and redirecting over and over that begins to stabilize the sense of calm and steadiness.

No judgment. It's like training the puppy, we say. When the puppy gets up after you say "sit" and "stay" for a few seconds and runs around or pees in the corner, you clean it up. You pick the puppy up kindly and put it back down. Sit. Stay. You don't want to beat the puppy or frighten it. You want the puppy to learn that it can rest, just as you can.

Gently, with ease, this breath. One after another.

This breath. Notice its beginning, middle, and end, the space between breaths. How it rises and falls like waves of the ocean. You become the still and quiet witness of this breath. Calm and ease.

This breath. Use a kind and tender attention.

Let the stillness and steadiness deepen.

You are becoming the loving witness, the mindful loving awareness. Rest in the present, noticing the breath, this life breath breathing itself.

And with the same mindful loving awareness, you can acknowledge where the attention gets pulled when it leaves the breath. Not to stay there, but as if to acknowledge with a bow—planning, or remembering, or sadness, or longing, or love and joy. And maybe you can even add a little thank you. Oh, planning. Thank you. And then return to the breath. Oh, remembering. Thank you. And then return to the breath. Oh, worrying. Thank you. Return to the breath. Oh, love or joy. Thank you. And return to the breath.

You are the loving awareness, the witness of the breath and the waves of experience that rise around the breath. Stay simple. Just this breath now. Or just whatever wave appears to pull you away. Thank you.

You are the loving witness, the loving awareness itself, noticing this breath. Calm. Peace. And kindness toward whatever experience gets strong around the breath. Thank you to each one. And then return to the breath.

As the stillness deepens and the sense of being the loving witness, the loving awareness itself, grows—let this loving kindness fill your being. Add in the metta, the loving kindness: as all things arise and pass, may I be filled with loving kindness. Receive them all with kindness. Safe and protected. Kind and well.

Kindness and loving awareness holding this whole body, heart and mind, this whole human life that you've been given. Tenderly. Steady, loving and deep. With every breath and every wave of experience met with loving kindness, loving awareness.

And finally, let this loving kindness and loving awareness that fills awareness itself, that fills the sky of consciousness—let it spread from you out in every direction, like a lighthouse, like a beacon, wishing calm and peace for beings everywhere. Spreading loving kindness in every direction to beings far and near.

Rest in stillness and love. Let it naturally shine forth and be present for all you touch, and out to beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 21

Forgiving Heart | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 53 min

> *In this profound talk, Jack Kornfield draws upon the wisdom of his teacher Ajahn Chah—"If you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go fully, you'll have complete and joyful peace"—to explore the transformative power of forgiveness. Reflecting on the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and his own peace work with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, Kornfield examines how even the most entrenched conflicts can begin to heal when we remember our shared humanity.*
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> *Kornfield outlines essential principles for wise forgiveness: it is not weak or naive, does not condone harmful actions, requires first stopping ongoing harm, and is ultimately not about the other person but about freeing our own hearts from being chained to the past. He shares moving stories from his work with Mahā Ghosānanda, the Gandhi of Cambodia, and from hospice settings, illustrating how forgiveness operates as a gradual process—like water on stone—rather than a quick fix.*
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> *The talk culminates in a guided meditation through the three directions of forgiveness practice: asking forgiveness from those we have harmed, forgiving ourselves for the ways we have caused our own suffering, and offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us. Drawing on the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching that the truly courageous are those who can forgive, Kornfield invites practitioners to remember their Buddha nature and begin the tender, brave work of releasing bitterness to repair both heart and world.*

The Forgiving Heart

My teacher Ajahn Chah said, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. And if you let go fully, you'll have complete and joyful peace.

So here we are at the turning of the next seasons. The Jewish New Year and holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, has just passed. The New Year, which is in that culture or system, follows the time of the harvest—to start the New Year after the harvest. And of course, we're always starting again. How do we renew ourselves? How do we atone, which is the Yom Kippur day of forgiveness? How do we somehow cleanse the past and start in a gracious, wise, loving way again?

Earlier this year, I joined online with a group of peacemakers called Combatants for Peace. The event was held in Beit Jallah, a town in Palestine. The two warriors on the panel with me were an Israeli commander named Tulsi and a Palestinian combat leader named Osama. They had both led their military units in conflict where their comrades, their followers, people with them on both sides, were killed. And somehow, as they said in our conversation and in the work that we did for all those who watched, they simply couldn't do it any longer. They realized we have to find a way to share this land in peace. We need to find a better way. And so they've been on this journey, trying to convince and support and awaken this possibility, which is there on all sides.

Of course, it's not easy. People get really stuck.

A few years ago, I was doing some peace work in Myanmar, or Burma. It was during the time of the targeting—which has continued—of the relatively large and long-standing Muslim population there, trying to drive them out, great anti-Muslim racism. I met with one of the main Buddhist monks who was a kind of provocateur of this, even though he was a famous monk, an anti-Muslim leader. I read to him some of the Buddhist texts and said, as an upstart I might say, "You know, this is really not following the Dharma." And he agreed and said he would change his ways. Of course it was a lie. He continued to foment violence against the Muslims.

Around the same time, when I was in Palestine, I met in Hebron one of the most vociferous anti-Arab activists, the head of one of the political parties in Israel that wanted to throw all the Palestinians and Arabs out of Israel and out of the Palestinian land. Even with a kind approach and trying to inquire—nothing. Not easy.

And we know it in the polarization in this country as well. This isn't a quick fix.

But yet we need to understand. Dear ones, we have to know: What is it that allows Northern Ireland to stop killing one another? What is it that allows Rwanda to begin to mend a country, a nation torn apart between the Hutus and the Tutsis, and find a road to peace? What is it that's allowed France and Germany, which were these incredibly violent enemies in World War I and World War II—not that long ago, in my lifetime actually—to become friends?

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember your true nature, your Buddha nature, for there's a reality deeper than the conflicts. There's a truth and a reality deeper than all these conflicts.

When I was doing peace work there in Palestine and Israel, I remember joining teenagers who'd been brought together at the Sulqita. I was working with a group of Jerusalem peacemakers that included Muslim sheikhs and rabbis and Druze and leaders

from all different spiritual traditions. These teenagers—mostly boys, although there were girls there as well—had been meeting together for three years, and they finally managed to bring their parents together.

There was great difficulty trying to get the Palestinian parents over into Israel, into this community that was hosting them. And there were a hundred or a hundred fifty of us all together. I remember standing in a circle with these folks—Palestinian parents and Israeli mothers and fathers, all holding hands, the Arab women holding hands with their family members, of course—and gazing at these kids in the middle, maybe a dozen or fifteen of their teenage children, who'd become heart friends. They'd become so close together.

And then one of the Arab mothers turned to me, and through a translator said, "You know, for twenty years, I've only seen Israeli soldiers. I forgot they had mothers."

It was such a touching moment—for her to see, and for us to remind one another that who we really are is not all these stories that are told, but that there's a profound humanity and connection underneath it all.

So here we are, human beings in this incarnation, in a world of unbearable beauty and an ocean of tears. How do we touch our measure of suffering? With a forgiving heart—that's how.

I remember at the founding of Naropa Buddhist University, the first summer teaching together with Chögyam Trungpa and Ram Dass and Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein and Krishna Das, and many other teachers, two thousand students or more. On the full moon that summer—it might have been Guru Purnima or some great holiday—we had a bonfire out in the flatland under the moon, where you could see the whole wall of the Rocky Mountains as you do coming from the Great Plains up to Boulder, the mountains arising above you. A huge bonfire.

It was meant in part to be a celebration, but also a Kali fire, a fire of purification—to release and atone and move on. All the students were invited to write down things they needed to let go of, things they needed forgiveness for, things they needed to release in order to start anew.

Ram Dass, in his role at that time as a kind of priest—still wearing white and beads in the beard, Baba Ram Dass was his persona then—had set up a small tent. Before you could go and throw your words and troubles into the Kali fire to be released and purified, you were invited to step in and confess, or to speak from the heart, to tell Ram Dass what troubled you, what weighed on you.

Ram Dass stood there as a thousand people went through his little tent, listening to each one. Afterward, I watched them throw things into the fire, and then they began to dance. You could feel a new freedom.

I asked Ram Dass what he had heard. He said, "Oh, so many stories. A lot of self-hatred, a lot of self-doubt, judgment, a lot of confusion around sexuality, a lot of problems in families." He said over and over again, the same kinds of stories. And he said, "All I did was gaze at them with eyes like my guru's—to see who they really are, that secret beauty underneath it all—and bless them. And then they threw it in the fire."

We all need that.

With mindful, loving awareness—the very practice we've been doing—we can step out of the tyranny of self-judgment, judging ourselves for all the things we haven't done right or haven't done or have done wrong. We can forgive ourselves for being learners in this life. Did you get a manual when you were born? Are you supposed to be an expert? This is, as some say in a somewhat joking way, a training planet. This is a place for us, when we're born, to remember—even though we've lost it in ways—to remember our nobility, to remember the possibility of heart, the great heart of compassion, forgiveness, kindness, awakening.

Yeats, the great Irish poet, probably one of the greatest, Nobel laureate—toward the end of his life he writes:

I'm content to follow to its source
every event in action and thought.
Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot.
When such as I cast out remorse
so great a sweetness flows into the breast
for we must laugh and we must sing
for we are blessed by everything
and everything we look upon is blessed.

This is the gift of forgiveness. We can be forgiven, and we can forgive.

I remember the story of a hospice worker, a woman who worked at Laguna Honda Hospital here in San Francisco in the hospice ward. A man had been brought in who was quite sick, on his trajectory toward dying and death. He was in the orange garb of a convict, a man who'd been taken out of prison, and in fact he was shackled with a handcuff to his bed.

The hospice worker, this volunteer, spent time with him. She listened to his story, she tended him, she cared for him. She asked about his family, and he said he hadn't seen his mother for thirty years. He hadn't wanted her to see him in prison. He was so deeply ashamed of what he had done. He felt he couldn't face his mother.

But the hospice worker, with her good heart, slowly, slowly convinced him that it would be worthwhile, important, essential for him to make amends, to see his mother. And so the man, shackled to his bed, finally gave her permission to call. She arranged for his mother to come.

She said an old woman with a cane came down the hall, dressed mostly in black. She met the hospice worker at the door with a greeting, then looked in at her son and just stood there.

The hospice worker, this woman who told me the story, began to weep as she spoke. She said this mother stood there and looked at her son, and she began to weep. Her countenance was like the face of Mother Mary holding her beloved child, even after all that had happened to him, after the crucifixion. It was like seeing the face of the mothers of the world, holding their children no matter what.

This is who we are.

Suffering is not the end of the story. This is the good news in this mysterious human realm. Yes, there is suffering, but there is something so much greater. There is also freedom of heart—the great heart of compassion, redemption, peace.

O nobly born, we are invited to step out of the battle. As Ajahn Chah says, if you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness. And if you let go fully, you'll be truly happy.

Yes, you might say—and ask quite rightly—but what if you're being harmed?

I think of the story of Amy, a meditation student who came to talk to me some years ago after her father died. Her father had started a big construction company, and her three brothers and she were supposed to receive the inheritance. But the brothers began to fight, and especially they tried, in some very unpleasant and mean ways, to cut Amy out of her inheritance—to steal it from her. She was both in grief and confused: what do I do?

So we did a lot of inner work over some time, first to settle and steady her. I said, you know, you can go through this. Then we talked about finding the best lawyer she could, which she really needed to do to protect herself. As we talked and met over a period of time, she got the lawyer and at least saved part of her inheritance.

One day she came in and said, "You know, they're still my brothers. No matter how much I was hurt, they're still my brothers, and I don't want to abandon my family. I need to find a way to love them again." And she began doing the forgiveness practice that we'll be doing later this evening together.

In a similar way, another woman was in the middle of a terrible divorce. In this case, her husband was trying to keep all the money, turn the children against their mother, and cut her out completely so she wouldn't even be able to visit them—even though he'd been the one who had the affair. And he was doing it in a mean-spirited way, using a lot of the money they had both shared to hire lawyers to help him.

Again, as we began to work together, I said, get yourself a kick-ass lawyer, because you need it to protect yourself. And she did that. She worked in her own way to hang in there so that she wouldn't lose custody of her children.

One day she came in to see me and said, "With all that's going on, my ex is trying to turn the children against me"—as happens in these terrible divorces. And she got quiet and looked at me and said, "I've been meditating, and I realized that I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children. I will not talk badly about their father, no matter what he does."

There was such dignity and courage and bigheartedness in what she said. Yes, she was protecting herself, but even more importantly, she was protecting her children.

The principles for wise forgiveness are these. Those of you who've been with me over the years have heard them, but they're still important to remember.

First, forgiveness is not weak or naive. It doesn't mean to forgive and forget. It takes real courage, deep courage. As it says in the Bhagavad Gita, if you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can offer love in exchange for hatred.

Forgiveness also does not condone what happened. It doesn't in any way say that it's fine or okay or good. In fact, it's critical with forgiveness, as a first step, to make sure that you don't allow the harm to continue—to step away, to intervene, to stop in any way you can, whatever you need to do. And it doesn't even mean that you have to speak to people if they're going to continue to harm you, or have contact with them. It neither

condones, nor does it allow harm to continue. You can say, "I will put my body in the way of making sure this harm does not continue to myself or others," or "I will step away to make sure." It takes this courage.

Also, forgiveness is not quick. You can't paper it over. Like grief, it is a long, tender, hard process of the heart digesting the pain that's happened and, little by little, coming to terms and extending forgiveness.

The story I always tell is of the man who wrote to the IRS during tax season: "I haven't been able to sleep since I cheated on my taxes last year. So I've enclosed a three thousand dollar anonymous cashier's check made out to the IRS. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

This is how it works. Like metta, you don't start with the most difficult place. You start with what opens your heart. You do it a little at a time, at the sweet place first, a step at a time.

He led these peace walks, at the front with a bell, chanting: "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed" — followed by a thousand people walking behind him, back to their villages.

Ghosnanda was invited to the US Congress to speak because he was part of the group working to ban landmines worldwide — that group received a Nobel Prize. For Ghosnanda, it was very personal because he'd seen too many children who'd lost their limbs, who'd been blown up by mines.

When he stood up before Congress to speak, he said, "Yes, I beg you, you must sign the worldwide treaty to ban landmines." And then he paused and said, "But even more importantly, we have to work together to remove the landmines in the heart — the fear and the hatred and all of those things that create the landmines."

Yes, we need to work outwardly and do what we can for this extraordinary and amazing earth. And at the same time, we need to remove the landmines in our own hearts.

I believe it was Longfellow who said, "If you could read the secret history of your enemies, you would see suffering and tragedy enough to disarm all hostility." If you could see the secret history of even those who are doing terrible things — the fears and the trauma and all that drives them — it would disarm your heart.

Think of this story of Maria Elena. Maria Elena grew up with a lot of shame about being poor. Outwardly, she tried to overcome this with hard work. She was the first in her extended family to ever go to college, but struggling with feelings of insecurity, she felt like an outcast.

After she graduated, she worked in the city for the Department of Public Safety. Sixteen years later, she transferred to a farming community just in from the coast near Oxnard. She told me, "After I'd lived in the city, now I go in the coffee shop and see the old clothes and the uneducated farmers. It's so easy to judge them and feel myself as different. We may be different in education and politics, but these are false ways we separate ourselves. Now, when I really look, I just want to drop my judgments and be with them — be with us.

"My father was like them. He drank too much. He berated us, his daughters. He was terrible to his sons. I was desperate to get free of him, of our family, but my shame and anger and resentment stayed with me.

"When I began to practice mindfulness, compassion, loving kindness, it was hard to sit still. After a while, I realized how sad I was and how much hurt was in my body. I was just trying to cope. I was grateful to be taught the loving kindness and forgiveness practices. I did them twice a day for two years. I needed to forgive myself for being so angry and ashamed as much as I needed to forgive my father. Practicing forgiveness was like learning to stand and walk and feel good about myself."

And then I was able to go home to see my family, even my father, without hurting so much. Seven years later, when my father got sick, it wasn't hard to go back. I saw his slow decline until finally he was a weak old man on his bed. I knew that I loved him. I had forgiven us all.

With forgiveness, we repair the world. Sometimes it's your broken heart that opens your loving heart.

You all remember the famous old Zen story about the two monks and the young woman in a beautiful kimono at the edge of the river, unable to cross because the river had risen in the storms. One of the monks walked over and, with her permission, picked her up in his arms and carried her across the river and put her down on the other side. The two monks continued to walk on their journey to a distant temple.

Sometime later, some hours later, the other monk had been chewing on it and finally blurted out, "How could you do that? We monks are not supposed to look at, much less pick up women—young women in beautiful kimonos like that. How dare you do that?" And the second monk looked at him and said, "I put her down back there. Are you still carrying her?"

We've all heard this story, and it's been repeated for centuries. Why? Because it's true. We can let go. We can put down the burdens of resentment. We can see anew with a heart of tenderness and compassion. We can engage this world and care for it in a very different way.

For who you are is consciousness itself—not your conditioning and not your history. They have to be honored, but they are not who you are. Not your body or your emotions that are constantly changing, or that river of thoughts, most of which you wouldn't want anybody else to hear anyway. That's not who you are. You are loving awareness, consciousness born into this body. And this is the place of freedom.

The invitation of the Buddhist teachings is to step out of the body of fear. *Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.* The invitation is to step out of the body of fear and find that beauty and wellbeing and peace that comes with forgiveness and graciousness of heart, looking at the world with tender eyes.

I like to read this story of Roberto DiVincenzo. He was the most famous golfer in Argentina some years ago—maybe the equivalent of Tiger Woods, or if you're older, maybe of Arnold Palmer. Once he won a tournament, and after receiving the check and smiling for the cameras, he went to the clubhouse and prepared to leave. Sometime later, walking alone to his car in the parking lot, he was approached by a young woman. She congratulated him on his victory and then told him that her child was seriously ill and near death. DiVincenzo was touched by her story and took out a pen and endorsed his winning check for payment to the woman. "Make some good days for the baby," he said as he pressed the check into her hand.

The next week he was having lunch in a country club when a PGA official came to his table. "Hey, some of the guys in the parking lot last week told me you met a young woman there after you won the tournament." DiVincenzo nodded. "Well," said the official, "I have news for you. She's a phony. She has no sick baby. She fleeced you, my friend."

DiVincenzo looked up. "You mean there's no baby who's dying?"

"That's right," said the official.

"Well, that's the best news I've heard all week," he replied.

We can do this, you know. We can live with a gracious and tender, forgiving and compassionate heart. We can learn to practice forgiveness, and it is a practice. When I was first taught, I was told to do it twice a day for six months or so. And then I began to think, wait a second—that's three hundred times.

And I did it, a little at a time—for my father, who had been so violent and abusive, for other people in my life, for people around me. I think Mark Twain said something about how much we only wish the foibles of other people's personalities would change. But anyway, I just did it. I did it and did it. Little by little, water on a stone. You know how that goes. Slow, soft, small, tender. And it became more and more the way that I wanted to live.

But it's not just me. It's us. The ones we admire, those who are at the top of the pantheon—Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama and so many other great spiritual figures—they're not really different than us. They have simply opened themselves to that great loving heart that is who you really are, who we really are.

So let's practice the three directions of forgiveness together now for a bit. If you would, shift your body and find a way to sit comfortably and at ease. This will be a guided meditation for ten or fifteen minutes. Take it as a practice. The word *practice* means practice. It doesn't mean perfect. It's an invitation to your heart to remember what's possible, to begin the road of tenderness and forgiveness, to begin to open the gates to the inner garden of freedom—to not carry the burdens of the past.

When you're ready, close your eyes gently and take thirty seconds just to come back to breathe gently and rest with whatever has been touched in this talk. Wherever you are, hold it all in tenderness.

Now, breathing gently, let us begin the first of the three directions of forgiveness practice. There are many ways—take this as a reflection as you listen. There are many ways in which I have hurt and harmed others, betrayed them, abandoned them, caused them pain, hurt them in all kinds of ways, knowingly and unknowingly. I begin to remember these now. Let yourself remember some of the ways in which you've hurt and harmed others or caused them pain, abandoned or betrayed them. You can remember. You can know. And as you do, feel the tenderness, the regret, the care that comes in the heart.

Now reflect either generally on all that you remembered, or you can choose a particular person or circumstance. In the ways that I've hurt and harmed you, knowingly or unknowingly, caused you pain, caused you to suffer, abandoned you, betrayed you,

caused harm to you in any way—small and large—out of my own confusion and fear, out of my own hurt and pain and misunderstanding and ignorance... In this moment, seeing with the heart, I ask your forgiveness. In any way, out of my own pain or fear, confusion, hurt, or anger, that I've caused harm to you—please forgive me. Please forgive me.

And sense, as you do, that you can be forgiven. That forgiveness is possible. That forgiveness is our birthright—to start over again. Oh nobly born, to ask forgiveness, to receive forgiveness, to begin again.

And now, with the same tenderness of heart, let us do the second direction of forgiveness. Just as we ask forgiveness of others whom we've harmed and caused to suffer, so too we have to forgive ourselves for all that we've done that's caused harm to others—but even more, the ways that we've caused harm to ourselves. In this moment, I remember the ways I've abandoned myself, betrayed myself, caused myself pain or suffering, just as I've done to others—the ways that I've brought hurt to myself, judged myself so harshly, harmed myself.

In the many ways that I remember now—that I've hurt or harmed myself, betrayed myself as I've harmed others at times, judged and undermined myself—in all these ways, out of my fear, out of my own confusion and hurt, out of anger and ignorance and misunderstanding, out of my pain and hurt, I now offer myself forgiveness. I forgive myself.

And if you wish, you can put your hand on your heart. Hold yourself with tenderness. In this moment, I release myself. I forgive myself. As Yeats says, "I measure the lot, forgive myself the lot."

And let the sweet nectar of forgiveness fill your consciousness and your body.

You can do this. You can be forgiven. This is tending the heart. O nobly born, this is remembering who you really are—remembering your Buddha nature, your true nature, the great heart of forgiveness.

And finally, the third direction of forgiveness. There are many ways that others have hurt and harmed me. Just as I've harmed others or harmed myself, there are so many ways and times that others have betrayed me, hurt me, abandoned me, caused me pain and suffering—knowingly and unknowingly. This has happened, and we all carry these hurts.

Let yourself remember and see all the ways that you've been abandoned and hurt, harmed, betrayed. And perhaps choose one that feels important, one where it's time to begin to forgive and let go. Remember what happened and the pain you still carry. And visualizing, say: In the way that you harmed me or hurt me, in the way that you betrayed or abandoned me, caused me pain—sometimes so much pain—out of your own fear and hurt, out of your own pain and anger and confusion, I see this now with a forgiving heart. And to the extent that I'm ready—because you can't rush this—to the extent that I'm ready, I offer you forgiveness. It might be a little or a lot. It might be just the beginning. To the extent that I'm ready, I forgive you. I release you. I will not carry bitterness in my heart.

And feel, as you do, that you're opening the door of forgiveness—maybe beginning the process of letting go, a tender release, a courageous forgiveness.

With these three directions, together we've been practicing forgiveness: asking forgiveness of others, forgiving ourselves, and offering it to those who've harmed us. Return now to a place of quiet and dignity. O nobly born, remember that this freedom and greatness of heart is who you really are. Trust it. Practice it. Let your heart be free.

As the Bhagavad Gita says, this practice takes courage. If you want to see the courageous, the heroic, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the loving, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see those who can laugh with joy and move on into a new season in their life, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see those who in themselves can repair the world, and who can bring this spirit to the conflicts and difficulties around us so that we might share in the repair of the world—look to those who can forgive.

CHAPTER 22

Mindful Loving Witness Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 24 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a practice of establishing mindful, loving awareness—what he calls becoming the "loving witness" to all experience. The session begins with careful attention to embodied presence, settling into a posture that is both alert and gracious, "halfway between heaven and earth under your own tree of enlightenment."*
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> *The meditation unfolds in stages, first using the breath as an anchor to bring body and mind together. Kornfield invites practitioners to notice how the body breathes itself, connecting this personal breath to the larger rhythms of life—the winds across mountains and oceans, and all breathing creatures sharing this ocean of air. Drawing on Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, he suggests the gentle mental noting of "ease, calm, relax" with each breath.*
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> *As the practice deepens, practitioners learn to work skillfully with the "waves" of experience—thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise and pull attention away from the breath. Rather than struggling against these experiences, Kornfield teaches a gentle naming practice: acknowledging each wave with a soft bow before returning to the breath. This approach embodies the Buddha's teaching on impermanence—all things rise and pass away, and coming into harmony with this truth brings happiness. The meditation concludes with the recognition that we are not merely observing experience but are the loving awareness itself, capable of holding even difficulty with tender compassion.*

So let's begin with a period of meditation.

Let yourself find a way to sit, if you can, that's comfortable and at ease, stable and yet gracious. You sit, you take your seat halfway between heaven and earth under your own tree of enlightenment. And when you settle yourself, if you can, let your eyes close gently for this time.

And tune in. Sense how your body can both be alert and present and also gracious, like the queen or the king seated on your throne halfway between heaven and earth. Take a couple of long, slow, deep breaths and begin to release whatever you carry with each breath to be here more fully.

Tune into this amazing, mysterious body that you have been given. It has been given because you didn't actually order it online—even Amazon won't deliver it. Somehow you came into this body. As you feel and tune in, let the eyes and face be soft and loosen the jaw. Let the body begin to relax. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck. Let it find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body wherever you're seated and sense how the earth can completely support you. You can rest just where you are. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, loving kindness and care.

Now, with this embodied presence, bring a quality of loving awareness, of mindful loving awareness, first to this moment, the reality of the present, just where you are. To bring the body and mind together for the first part of the meditation, notice if you can how the body is breathing itself. You can feel your breath as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to feel the breath, you can place one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand. Or feel the whole body just breathing and exchanging air with the great winds that come across the mountains and the oceans, and with all the other breathing creatures that share this ocean of air.

Let the breath be easy. As you sense the breath, you can whisper in the background, if you wish, the words Thich Nhat Hanh suggests: ease with each breath, calm, and relax with each breath into the rhythm of life breathing itself.

Of course, as you sense each breath, there will be thoughts that appear—plans, memories, evaluations, judgments, hopes, fears, images. There will be emotions: sadness, excitement, peacefulness, anxiety. There will be sounds. For this first part of the meditation, stay with the breath. Each time the attention wanders, come back to it and let all those other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel this breath just now, in the middle of it all. Ease. Calm. Inviting a sense of steadiness. This breath. No judgment. No evaluation. Simply notice. Notice what you notice. How the breath breathes itself. How the attention gets carried off. And whenever you notice—after thirty seconds or five minutes—you simply come back to this next breath, gently and graciously, like training the puppy. Sit. Stay. Just here.

As you establish a mindful, loving presence with each breath, quieting, steady, notice when one of the waves that rises and falls around the breath becomes so strong it pulls your attention away. As you notice getting carried off by thinking or planning, by sadness or worry or excitement or love, as soon as you notice this strong wave, as if to bow

to it, name it gently, softly: worry, planning, sadness, love, joy, tingling, hearing of sounds. Acknowledge the wave, and as you do, naming it gently, let it rise and fall, then return back to the breath.

Rest just here in the reality of the present, with each breath appearing and disappearing, gently acknowledging the strong waves that pull your attention from the breath. You become the mindful loving awareness, the loving witness of each breath as it rises and passes, or of the waves of experience that you name gently as if to bow to them. Yes. Thank you.

You are the witness, the loving awareness, the space of awareness that notices what arises and passes away. This breath. This moment's experience. You are the loving witness, the mindful loving awareness itself.

Rest in it.

All things are impermanent. They rise and they pass away. To come into harmony with this truth brings true happiness.

Staying with mindful, loving awareness, let your eyes open. The breath still breathes itself, and you are the loving awareness—present, open.

And even if the meditation was difficult, with struggle, worries, physical pain, you become the loving witness to it all. Not to judge or try to fix, but to hold it with tender compassion and kindness.

CHAPTER 23

On Death | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 58 min

> *In this deeply moving Dharma talk, Jack Kornfield addresses what Zen tradition calls 'the great matter'—death itself. Drawing from the teachings of Master Rinzai, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Ramana Maharshi, Kornfield explores how we can meet impermanence with an open heart rather than fear. He shares the Buddha's teaching that when we do not cling to anything as 'I, me, or mine,' we are not seen by the king of death—pointing to the practice of resting as the loving witness rather than identifying with our roles, bodies, or transient experiences.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together personal stories—sitting with his dying father, receiving a terrifying misdiagnosis, experiencing shared death phenomena—with traditional Buddhist contemplations on impermanence. He discusses the wisdom found in charnel ground meditations, out-of-body experiences during deep practice, and the mysterious ways consciousness transcends physical boundaries. The talk touches on Frank Ostaseski's hospice work and William Peters' research on shared death experiences, illustrating how the gates between worlds open when we approach death mindfully.*
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> *The teaching culminates in a vision of the bodhisattva who can enter all realms of experience—joy and sorrow, birth and death—with 'gift-bestowing hands' and an open heart. Quoting Thich Nhat Hanh's words on his 95th birthday, Kornfield reminds us: 'This body is not me. I am life without boundaries.' He closes with Mary Oliver's poem 'When Death Comes,' inviting practitioners to live as 'a bride married to amazement' rather than merely visiting this world.*

I'm glad we can be together this evening. The talk, which may be challenging in its own way, is going to be on death. That's its title: On Death.

Last time I talked about forgiveness, and we did a forgiveness practice. Next month, Thanksgiving month, I'd like to do some teachings on gratefulness and gratitude. Both of these—forgiveness and gratitude—are sweetness of the heart.

This is the month that has Halloween. You can see all the decorations in every store already, getting ready for Christmas probably right away after. The Day of the Dead. And also today is the holiday—remember, holiday means holy day—that was Columbus

Day, now Indigenous Peoples Day. Both of these, the Day of the Dead and Halloween for sure, but also Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples Day, are woven together with birth and death.

Columbus Day was declared by Benjamin Harrison in 1892 as a result of the public lynching of eleven Italian men in New Orleans who were considered darker-skinned criminals because there had been a murder, and they were thrown into prison as possible suspects. Hundreds of people gathered and broke into the prison and hung them all. And of course, if we look at that as the origin of Columbus Day, we also have to look back at the Native American genocide. If it's Native American Day, yes, there is the celebration of all the things that are here in the native culture, but also the decimation and the suffering and the death that goes with it whenever we honor our natives, those who lived on this land for thousands of years before us. So these holy days are woven in with death itself.

And if we want to change the world, if we want to serve the world in some beneficial way, we have to face death.

Zen Master Rinzai, one of the greatest of the Buddhist Zen teachers of Japan, said: "Followers of the way"—that's you—"this one speaking right before you is a person who enters fire without being burned, goes into water without being drowned, and plays about in the three deepest hells as if in a fairground. Such a person enters the world of hungry ghosts and dumb animals without being molested or harmed by them. How is this so? Because there is nothing such a one fears or dislikes. Do not tire yourself by making up discriminations of what is right and wrong, struggling in the ocean of birth and death. Let yourself open to it all, and quite naturally of itself, you will find the way."

That's an amazing teaching. Goes into the worst and most painful experience as if in a fairground. Plays with the joys and sorrows, the praise and blame of the world of birth and death, with a clear mind, a spacious mind, and an open heart.

Now, of course, this is not an easy thing to talk about. It's a heavy lift, because the truth is that we are profoundly challenged at this time. Collectively, we face climate change and the loss of species, the great movement to bring some healing for the suffering of racism and economic injustice, looking for social and economic and racial justice. We're in the throes of reimagining our culture in a healthier way. But right now we also face the suffering of it.

And then personally, we all know those who've had COVID. Almost three quarters of a million Americans—all those little white flags out on the lawn in Washington, D.C. in the mall. People who've died. Death.

It's a mystery. Did you think it wouldn't happen to you?

There's a story somewhere in the great Hindu teachings. Someone asked the God Krishna, "What are the most miraculous things on earth?" And Krishna answers with a few things and then says, "But the most miraculous of all is that people can see others getting sick and old, can see those dying around them, and think that it won't happen to them."

Did you think it wouldn't happen? asks the Buddha.

So how do we find a freedom of heart in this world, in this world of birth and death? How do we act and see it, see it deeply with the eyes of wisdom?

In Zen, this question of death is called the great matter. And they say: Practice ardently, for life is short. Find the answer to the great matter.

But we live in a culture that's really one of denial, that has lost its way. It's a culture focused on youth and whatever is smiling and sexy. Someone who wrote me a message before this talk said, "I hope you can speak to this poem by the great Chinese poet Han Shan, Cold Mountain." He writes: "Even if you store up rhinoceros horn, wear a tiger's eyeball, drive away evil with a peach branch, or make a garlic necklace, even if you warm your belly with dogwood wine or drink wolfberry soup to empty your mind, in the end, you cannot avoid death."

And here we are in our modern form—the keto diet and eating just kale, or the people into the cryo-freezing of their body and brain, hoping that they will somehow be able to revive it in future centuries. Or the ones who are looking to artificial intelligence to download their brain into, or those who are buying an underground bunker in some house in New Zealand. All the ways that we might hope to avoid death.

Not likely.

There's a truth that's bigger than all of this, and our heart knows it. All is subject to change. All is subject to birth and death. This is tonight's talk on wisdom. The other night's forgiveness, gratefulness, or the heart talks of love. This is wisdom. All is subject to arising and passing, subject to birth and death.

My dear colleague Michelle McDonald, who has taught retreats for many, many years at the Insight Meditation Society and still does, would work with kids as well as a teacher. She described how she was working with kindergarteners or preschoolers, age four or five, and talking about death because they were interested. Kids are interested. How does this world work? They'd heard about grandparents dying or pets dying. So

she said, let's together understand this. And she sent them out into the woods around the school where they were to look for anything they could find that had died. They came back in with handfuls of dead leaves and twigs and branches. Somebody even found a little piece of a skeleton, maybe of a squirrel that had died. All these different things—dead seeds and plants. And they made a pile of them and began to talk about it.

Then at one point she asked them, "Well, what would happen if there wasn't death?" And one of the wise little ones there, some wise little girl, said, "Well, then nothing would go away. There'd be more and more trees and more and more things. And there'd be no room for us." Because the ending of things is also the beginning of something new. Each end allows for the arising of something else.

The Buddha was approached by a man who said, as they usually ask, "Are you a Buddha? Are you a blessed one, a wise one, an enlightened one?" The Buddha nodded. The man said, "I have a question for you. How is it that we may practice or live so that we are not seen by the king of death?" Now there's a great question. How is it to live and practice so we are not seen by the king of death?

And the Buddha answered, "When you do not cling to anything as I, as me, as mine, then you will not be seen by the king of death."

What does this mean? This means to shift our attention, our locus of presence, of identity, from being identified with our role or our body or our place or whatever it happens to be, to be the loving witness. The witness of gain and loss, praise and blame, grief and joy, pleasure and pain. To be the mindful, loving witness of this dance of life—for this is who you are.

Now, of course I say this, and then you say, "Well, how do I live this in practice?" And it's not really so simple, is it? Because here we are in these bodies with our lives.

I remember when I'd first come back from practicing in the monasteries and I'd had long retreats and deep meditations—more than a year in silence in one little hut, living in the ascetic practice monastery in the forest. I was driving on the Massachusetts Turnpike, the freeway there, a couple months after I'd been back. As I was driving down the Massachusetts Turnpike, a truck a couple hundred yards ahead of me—a big truck—lost part of a tire. It flung into the air and smashed into a car that was following it. That car swerved off the road and other cars braked suddenly to avoid crashing into it. And I wasn't very far behind them. It was really clear that I could crash into them and could die.

My mind, from all those months and years of meditation, had a great equanimity and peace to it. I could feel, "Ah, look at this—this might be the day I might die." But I was so peaceful in the midst of it, just noticing, just the awareness.

But that's only part of the story, because then in my body rose this huge wave of adrenaline, and my hands gripped the wheel, and my body said, "Oh no, you're not gonna die," and wrenched the car over into the side of the road and into the grass to stop and avoid crashing.

It's as if there were these two dimensions, because we live in multiple dimensions. One part of me so at ease with it all from all those months and years of practice, and another part holding on—not now, not yet.

We live in these multiple dimensions. We cherish life.

And yet also we have to let go. As Mary Oliver writes, to live in this world, you must be able to do three things. To love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones as if your life depends upon it. To love what is mortal, hold it against your bones. And when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. These three things.

Larry Rosenberg, a wonderful teacher, wrote a book called *Living in the Light of Death*. What does death have to teach us? When it is, as Carlos Castaneda and his teacher Don Juan expressed, when it's taken as an advisor—to take death as an advisor, death constantly there over your left shoulder, reminding you of the brevity of life.

In the monastery, I sat in the charnel grounds when bodies were being burned through the night, watched the body go into ashes. We did meditations on death. We watched the decay of the body. And as I sat and went deep in meditation, I also had these amazing experiences—out of the body experiences where my consciousness floated out of my body. My body was still sitting there and I could look out the window of the little hut I was in and see things that were happening. And I realized, wow, I'm not this body. My body would dissolve into vastness, dissolve into light. Things would arise and disappear. The whole world would disappear and reappear. And I began to see from the quietest, deepest place that who we are is a play in consciousness, is a play of consciousness. On one level, we're born into this body. A spirit comes, consciousness comes into this body. You're not your body. You're not your feelings or thoughts. You are the consciousness inhabiting this body.

I've talked about sitting with my father when he was dying in the hospital. He was really terrified. He was a scientist who believed in physical matter, and I asked what he thought about death and he said, "You turn into dirt, there's nothing else." And he was so frightened, he kept looking at the monitors behind him in the ICU to see if he had

died yet. He didn't want that to happen with no one to notice. So when I asked him what happens, he said, "Nothing, you turn into dirt." I said, "Well, that could be, but you're a scientist. Maybe you should take it as an experiment."

And I told him about dissolving my body into light, about having out of the body experiences, about memories of past lives. I've done past life regressions for people around the world. Some believe, some don't, but it's amazing—half of them, even the non-believers, have these extraordinary experiences of past lives. I talked about sitting with people in hospice and having them begin to come close to death and leave their body and then come back—near death experiences, describing going out into light. I said, "So maybe you'll turn into dirt, but it's very possible that you'll find yourself floating out of your body, looking down, maybe reflecting, 'Wow, that was an incarnation, wasn't it? That was an amazing life.'" And I said, "Remember, if it happens, I told you so. Pay attention."

On another level, Ramana Maharshi, the great Indian sage, when he was dying of cancer and a student said, "Don't leave me, don't leave me," looked back with such tenderness and said, "But where could I go?" For on a deeper level, the whole sense of death is an illusion.

Here is Thich Nhat Hanh—today is his 95th birthday—our sage and elder and amazing being. He says: "This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I'm life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of consciousness, a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again soon. We meet today and tomorrow. We meet at the source of every timeless moment."

We meet each other in all forms of life.

I remember sitting with Thich Nhat Hanh a few years ago after his stroke. He could not speak. He was getting ready to leave. He'd been in San Francisco for a while, taken care of by Mark Benioff, with a whole cadre of monks and nuns. And he looked around on the last morning before he left at those of us sitting with him, with two eyes—one in which he could see each person, and he nodded to them. He looked at me, he looked at Trudy, he looked at us, acknowledging that we'd known each other in this amazing dance. And the other eye was focused on eternity. You could feel the timelessness as he gazed at us.

This is the reality. As Kalu Rinpoche says, when you understand, you'll see that you are nothing—and being nothing, you are everything. You are the play of consciousness, and this is what gives you freedom.

Beyond all the roles you have as a woman or a man or whatever your identity might happen to be, your roles at work, your roles as a child or a parent or whatever role you might take—you know this. You know you're not your roles. You switch. You come home from work and if you have a family, they don't see you as the worker; they see you as the sister or brother, son or daughter, partner or lover. They're all tentative. Who are you underneath it all? This is the question.

Well, all right. We sit back, we become the loving witness. We realize that everything changes and rises and falls. We find a place of equanimity, of the peaceful heart, the timelessness in the midst of it all.

Ha—not so easy, really.

About a dozen years ago, I started to have much wilder tremors than I have now. They've really quieted down a lot since then. But I passed out a couple of times in front of big groups of people, and something was clearly going wrong in my body, along with all kinds of other symptoms. I got tested in every way you can—scanned and examined and so forth. And then I got misdiagnosed.

I went to see this physician, and he said, "This is happening quickly." He watched me and heard the symptoms and described some disease kind of like ALS but not the same, and that it was going to happen fast. My body was deteriorating, and I nodded—I could feel it. And then he said, "Oh yes, and with this, you will lose your memory and you'll find yourself in dementia."

That was not in my program. I was maybe ready to die, but I wasn't ready to lose my awareness and end up demented, unable to even remember anything. And this huge wave of fear came up. I thought I was good with death, sitting in the charnel grounds, envisioning my own death, being at peace with it all. But when it came to "Okay, you're dying soon with dementia and everything else"—I got terrified. I was surprised at how fast and big it was. It took some days to start to come to terms with it. And then I found out it was a misdiagnosis, and I'm actually fine for now. It's all for now, you know, isn't it? Karma, they say, changes like the swish of a horse's tail.

And at seventy-six, Trudy and I look at each other very lovingly and say, "Wow, seventy-six is a pretty big number." Here we are—healthy and loving and together and happy—but that tail will swish. It will happen.

I remember going to talk with Ram Dass sometime after that. I told him, "I thought I was chill with death, and then I got this misdiagnosis—dementia and all this—and I got really frightened." And he smiled, he laughed. He said, "Oh yeah, I flunked the course a number of times."

But he was so gracious at that point, so spacious. He had become really ready to die, to drop his body, as they say. He and Mirabai Bush, dear friend and teacher, worked on this wonderful book called *Walking Each Other Home*. And he became so spacious about it. He said, "Dropping your body, leaving this body, is like taking off a tight shoe." For him, he had twenty-some years in a very painful and increasingly disabled body. So you could hear it—he was ready.

But this is the reality.

As it says in the texts, a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. All things appear for a time. It seems like we'll be here forever. And then this great mystery, which is here—as Don Juan says, death is stalking us, which is what makes life so precious and alive—that it will happen.

And whenever someone close to us dies, or whenever we approach death, something remarkable starts to happen. You know this. The gates between the worlds open. And you start to feel the sense of mystery. Like it all seems so solid—I know who I am, I have my world—and yet, and yet, it will all be gone.

There's a recent book by a friend and dharma practitioner entitled *At Heaven's Door* by William Peters. He had started at Zen Hospice some twenty years ago, and he was sitting in the hospital with a man, a hospice patient, holding his hand as his last breath began to happen and his spirit began to leave his body. William said the amazing thing was that he could feel himself going with him. Not only did this man leave his body, but he left his body too. He didn't even know it was the man's last breath, but they were there floating above their bodies in a realm of space and light. And then he came back, he said. It really touched him that he'd gone a little way with this man he was sitting with and holding his hand.

The book is about what he calls SDEs. You've heard of NDEs, near-death experiences. These are shared death experiences. And many of us have had them.

I was sitting with Marlene Jones, who was one of my dear friends and a teacher at Spirit Rock. She'd been in a coma for a week. She'd had heart failure. Her brain was flat-lined. She'd had a long time without oxygen. Nothing was functioning, no response. Everything was tried to bring her back—not possible. And finally her family decided they had to take her off life support.

I was holding her hand and I said, "Dear Marlene, if you can hear me"—people in a coma can, you know—I said, "It's too soon. I'll so miss you. You've been such a light for all of us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." And as I said it, two tears rolled down her cheeks. Nothing—the doctors had probed and shouted and touched and tried to get a response from her for a week, brain dead, zero. But those few words, so mysterious.

I tell the story of being with my beloved sister-in-law, Esther, as she was dying of cancer, coming back and forth to her house. It was very close. I was with her and my brother. I got up one morning right toward the end of her life, hurried to get down to be near her. But I had to stop and pick up some medicine at the drugstore. I was rushing through CVS, and all of a sudden, as I approached the checkout counter, my whole body changed. I relaxed and I thought, I felt, I sensed—oh, Esther died. I got to my car and called my brother. He said, "Oh, I'm glad you called. Esther died five minutes ago." And I knew it. Just as I, and people I was with, knew the surprising death by accident of people halfway around the world when I was living in Asia. How could we know?

When I teach in person, I ask the group how many have had this kind of experience where you've known something at a distance—that someone died, that you've lost someone. And a third of the hands go up. How could this be?

It's because, dear ones, we are not this body. We're not limited to the sense of the small self, as it's called, the separate self.

We are a life connected with it all, living through this unique body. But halfway around the world, because we are consciousness itself, we can know.

I was holding hands with my father as he was dying. And after he died, we were in Philadelphia—my mother and my three brothers and I—emptying his little apartment. His life had shrunk down. What are we going to do with all his things? There wasn't that much left. But he'd been a tyrant. Yes, he'd been a kind of compelling and brilliant scientist who developed some of the first heart-lung machines and worked in space medicine. But he was also a wife batterer, given to almost mentally ill, violent, paranoid fits throughout his life.

We asked the superintendent if there was a Salvation Army nearby where we could give the furniture. And the superintendent said, "Well, next block over, there's a battered women's shelter." We all just started to smile—the perfect justice of it.

We were staying at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel, this big suite, the four brothers and my mom. And I had a dream the next night. My father came to me. I don't dream about him particularly, but there I was. He came in my dream and looked kind of confused. I

said, "Dad, Dad, I'm so glad to see you. It's so touching to see you after what happened." He looked at me confused. "What happened?" I said, "Yes, I'm here with Mom, your ex, and my brothers. What happened is you died." He stared at me as if very confused. I said, "You died, Dad." He nodded as if digesting this. Then without a word, he turned his head and walked away and faded out.

People die in character. Some resist, some in fear, some in love, some let go more easily than others.

There's a story in Frank Ostaseski's wonderful book called *The Five Invitations*. He writes about all his years helping to found Zen Hospice and his hospice work. He tells about a man, a gay man named Matthew, who'd been raised in a fundamentalist Christian family. Commandments had been beaten into him by his fire-and-brimstone preacher of a father. He felt certain that God would condemn him for eternity to hell due to his sexual orientation. So Matthew had become a Buddhist to step out of the church and all the condemnation. They created an altar by his bedside with a beautiful healing thangka and a Buddhist statue.

But he was having a really hard time. Frank said, "I began to chant with him. I held his hand, massaged his feet, played his favorite music. Nothing worked." Because Matthew had spun into a world of confusion and shame and dread that somehow he was going to meet this condemning God and be condemned for eternity for being gay.

By two in the morning, Frank said, he was exhausted. He drove home to get some sleep. And as he was driving, he remembered his first holy communion, the Catholic ritual that ushers young innocents into the loving lap of God. When he got home, he searched through his mementos of childhood and located this plastic figurine of Jesus surrounded by lambs and little children. And instead of going to bed, he drove back to the hospital.

As Matthew continued to shout and toss and turn in agony, Frank took down the thangka and Buddha statue and replaced it with the statue of Jesus. Just as he was smoothing the altar cloth, the night cleaning woman named Dina came into the room and spotted the figurine. Setting her mop to one side, she said with great enthusiasm, "Merciful Jesus! When his kindness is with us, everything is right."

At once Matthew's eyes locked onto Dina. An angelic smile spread across his face as he pivoted toward the altar to gaze at the plastic Jesus statue and the lambs and children around him, then back in Dina's direction. His whole body relaxed. In that moment, the punishing God of Matthew's childhood—the one whose wrath he'd been told to fear, whose judgment made him feel like a terrible person—was transformed into the

merciful God he also knew and loved. The one who adored all his children, no matter their so-called faults and flaws. A kind, forgiving, all-accepting and benevolent, loving God. Dina's faith in God's love was so secure that it gave Matthew exactly the strength he needed to release his inner pain and self-condemnation.

I left them there together to get some rest. They no longer needed me.

As bodhisattvas—those of you who practice the life of compassion to reduce suffering for yourself and for all those around you, that's you, you bodhisattvas—we are always at the bedside of birth and death, of beginnings and endings, of impermanence. This is our role: to be with all things that change with an open heart.

I think of my friend Houston Smith, who was a great philosopher, teacher, and religious figure. He was a professor of religion at MIT and wrote this book on the religions of the world, one of the great bestsellers. Houston told this tragic story: his granddaughter, only twenty years old, was killed in some adventure she'd taken with someone else, killed in some terrible way. People tried to comfort him, sending messages and talking to him. He was heartbroken. The grief was just so big, so stupendous for him to carry, even as a wise old sage. This was his beloved granddaughter.

Later he said, "The person who helped me most in that time of despair and grief was a young man who lived two doors down the street from us. He was a Native American man. When I would sit out, he would come over onto the porch and sit next to me and hold my hand and say nothing." And that, he said, was the deepest and greatest comfort.

Mindful, loving presence in the birth and death, the arising and passing, the beginning and ending of things. They will begin and end. They are all impermanent. We will have our emotional reactions, but the mindful loving presence opens us to that which is timeless.

I think of working with Michael Meade and Luis Rodriguez in these retreats for young men from the gangs, getting out of the gangs in Oakland and Chicago and Los Angeles. These were kids who'd been brought up in terrible circumstances of poverty and racism and lack of opportunity. They joined a gang to find a family. But of course, there was the undeclared war on the streets. So many people died. And these were the kids trying to leave the life, leave the gang life, brought with mentors who took them to our retreats to find another way.

At the end of the time together, we made a ritual, a ceremony. I brought with me fifty skull malas, those 108 beads with tiny skulls. They look like Halloween adornments, but they're Tibetan, of course—you've seen them, remembering death. We created this ritu-

al for them after working so deeply together—storytelling and grieving and understanding and compassion, helping them see that they were not limited, not defined by their trauma. They were not defined by what had happened to them, that who they are was bigger than that. They had a free spirit.

Each one was given a blessing, the mala was put around them, and a chant was done by the whole group of young men and older men: "This is a man who has faced death, a young man who has faced death, and now chooses life."

You will meet death in personal ways—illness, loss, death of those around you, grief, the end of work, the divorce that's unexpected, people around you that leave, all the endings of things.

I remember leading retreats with Steven Levine, colleague and dear friend, retreats on death and dying. Steven would peer out after some days of our heart work together, and he would say, "Suppose this was the last week. Suppose this was the last day of your life." This was really touching and moving because it was during the time of the AIDS epidemic. We had lots of young men who had come on these retreats. There was no cure yet at that time.

"Suppose this was your last week, your last day. Who would you call? What would you say? And why are you waiting?"

Everyone got quiet to reflect on this.

To face death, to see that everything arises and passes, to take your seat in the middle of this world, like the bodhisattva or Buddha that you are, and to meet what comes and goes with a wise and tender heart—this is the great medicine that's needed.

I remember the story of Gary Snyder being interviewed by our colleague and dear friend Wes Nisker some years ago. Gary, I think, must be in his nineties now. He had written *Earth House Hold* and a number of amazing books about care for the earth, as a Zen teacher and as an environmentalist. He received the Pulitzer Prize for his work, trying to wake us up fifty years ago to being embedded in the environment in which we live and how we care for it.

And so Wes asked Gary, you look out now, you see the loss of species, the rising oceans, the desertification, bigger hurricanes, the ravages of climate change and the things that are happening in this world—what message do you have for us?

And Gary sat quietly and looked back from the place of wisdom and age and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt. Or anger. Or fear. Those are what cause these problems. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it. Save it out of love."

Love—the power that has mothers lift cars off their children. Love—the power that can change anything. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it.

And this is what living in the light of death offers us—of birth and death, of change, of gain and loss and praise and blame and success and failure, of tragedy and rebirth. We get to bring the great medicine of love.

And in that love, there's also a trust that suffering is not the end of the story. It's only the First Noble Truth. There are causes of greed and hatred, fear and anger—we can see this. But there is also a liberation, a freedom of heart in the midst of it all, and a path to liberation: loving awareness itself, mindfulness, compassion.

I remember being in a refugee camp. Refugees fleeing, as they often do, some of the worst tragedies you can imagine, everything being lost. And yet the kids in the camp, the five and six and seven year olds, eight year olds—they'd taken the milk cans that the UN brought and offered. After the milk was poured out, they punctured the side of them and put little sticks in the cans, then made handles for them and created these little carts. They were doing races and running around with their milk can cars and carts, unable to be stopped—their creativity and their laughter and their joy and their love.

Suffering is not the end of the story.

And we as the wise ones, as the Bodhisattvas, can rest in a timeless place of trust, unafraid to love well, no matter what's happening. Yes, death is an advisor, and it gives a clarity to us of what really matters.

But then, as the great Bodhisattva, as Master Rinzai whom I read about in the beginning: "You who are followers of the way, you can enter the world"—all of the world, its tragedies and its unbearable beauty—"with gift-bestowing hands," with an open heart, with a fearlessness that says, "Yes, this is life. This is samsara. This is existence as a human being. All things change."

And who we are is the loving witness, the consciousness itself, the witness to it all, the timeless awareness. We are the ancestors, soon enough, of the future generations—not just seven generations, but thousands of generations that are in the earth under our feet, and what we will join and be under the feet of the next generations.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *No Death, No Fear*, describes missing his mother after she died. He was living in his monastery in North Vietnam and went out one night after having had a dream of her, like I dreamed of my father. He was missing her so much, and he began to walk between the tea plants under the moonlight. And all of a sudden he had this profound realization that his mother was with him, that she had never left, that her dying was just her body, but not who she really was.

He said, "And she became the moonlight caressing my skin. And I realized she was still with me, and I realized my body, which had been inside her, was her body too. And together, as I took my steps, I could feel that it was her feet as well as my feet, leaving footprints in the damp soil in the moonlight."

There's a freedom. You know this. There are moments when you look back and say, "Wow, that was an intense thing I lived through. That was difficult. This is hard. That was wild. That was amazing." But the experiences are not who you are. Who you are is the one who knows, says Ajahn Chah. The consciousness, the witness to it all.

And as the Bodhisattva, you rest in vastness and a loving heart. And you can say, "Wow, what an amazing incarnation this has been." And you don't have to wait until the death of your body to see it that way. Because here we are in this mystery. And your identity will disappear in some way. But it doesn't matter, as Thich Nhat Hanh says: "This body is not me. I am life without boundaries."

I am life itself. I have never been born and I have never died.

To end, I want to read you what I consider a holy text. You all know this sutra, or most of you do. It's one of Mary Oliver's poems—she who has been one of our greatest poets, the Whitman of our time, perhaps. The poem is called "When Death Comes." You know it. Let it speak to your heart again.

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn, when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me and snaps the purse shut. When death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades, I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness? And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, and I look upon time as no more than an idea and consider eternity another possibility. And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy and as singular, and each body a lion of courage and something precious to this earth. When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms. When it's over, I don't

want to wonder if I'd made of my life something particular and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

A bride married to amazement.

Take a breath. Rest in the mystery. Yes, you love and tend this body and this life you've been given. And yet—and yet you also know: like a star at dawn and a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a phantom, a rainbow, a dream.

Let your heart be open and free and wise, to say yes. I can love it all.

I did a Sufi dance at Lama Foundation, one of Murshid Samuel Lewis's dances—Sufi Sam. I used to think they were kind of hokey, but they're really beautiful. There was an outer circle and an inner circle, and as we rotated to a certain rhythm, guitar playing and chanting, we would meet each person and chant and bow to them: *I love it when it comes. And I love it when it goes.* Then there would be a silence and some music, and the next person would appear. *I love it when it comes. And I love it when it goes.*

You are love. Fearless, timeless, open, loving awareness itself. Rest in it. Trust this. You'll see—as I said to my father, you wait and see.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 24

Gratitude and Generosity Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 27 min

> *In this gentle guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a progressive journey of gratitude and self-compassion. Beginning with breath awareness and bodily relaxation, the practice establishes a foundation of ease and presence before moving into deeper territory.*
>
> *The meditation unfolds through three stages of grateful acknowledgment. First, practitioners are invited to thank their body for all it carries and holds through daily life. Then attention moves to the heart—the seat of emotions—acknowledging the feelings, longings, fears, and loves it continuously bears. Finally, gratitude extends to the busy mind, honoring its ceaseless efforts to plan, protect, and figure things out. At each stage, the instruction is the same: thank you for trying to help me; I'm okay just now; you can relax.*
>
> *The practice culminates in a profound recognition: we are not the body, feelings, or thoughts we have been observing with such tenderness. We are the loving awareness itself—consciousness witnessing the flow of experience. This insight, central to many contemplative traditions, is offered not as abstract philosophy but as a felt, experiential truth. Kornfield invites practitioners to rest in this vast stillness, trusting it as their true home. The meditation beautifully weaves together the brahmavihāra of loving-kindness with the liberating insight of anattā (not-self), offering both comfort and freedom.*

So let's begin with a meditation.

Find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease, where there's a sense of dignity to your body, some uprightness if you can, if your body allows, so that you are like the queen or the king seated on your throne in the middle of your own life. And also gracious, not rigid or tight, but rather just present with a kind and loving awareness.

When you're ready, if you're able to, let your eyes close gently and take two or three long, deep breaths to release whatever obvious tension wants to be let go of. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position.

Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body as it touches the chair, the cushion, the floor, and how the earth completely supports you. Just where you are, you can let go and be supported just now. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now bring your attention to the fact of your body's breathing and feel it wherever it's most natural to sense—coolness in the nostrils, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's difficult to sense, put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you feel your breath, quite simply, we're not trying to become good breathers or manipulate the breath, but let it breathe itself. With each breath, let there be a sense of growing ease or calm steadiness. Breathing in ease and calm. Breathing out, inviting ease and calm.

Return to the breath for now at the beginning. Whenever the attention wanders off, just come back gently and kindly to the next breath that you notice. A steadying of attention, a relaxing into the rhythm of breath. The ever-present wave of breathing invites you to relax. This breath—beginning and middle and end. The in-breath arising. The space between breaths as it turns. The next breath. Like the waves of the ocean, the breath rises and falls. Steady attention. A loving awareness to this breath.

As you feel the breath or return to it when attention wanders, the quality of presence deepens, and with it you notice what's happening—the thoughts that come and go, the feelings and emotions, the sensations and experiences of body. All of these too can be included in the meditation's mindful loving awareness.

So now shift your attention from the breath to all the sensations, the field of sensations that make up your body—the pressure and warmth or cool, the tingling, the hardness or softness, the areas of pleasure or pain, tightness, holding, throbbing. With mindful loving awareness, notice the whole field of sensations that make up your experience of this human body.

If there are areas of pain or tension that are obvious, bring the mindful loving awareness to them, as if to bow to them. Hold them with kindness. Not trying to fix them, but hold them the way you would hold a child who is going through a hard time. Notice how this kind, loving awareness allows for the tensions and knots to begin to soften and open in their own way.

And now, as an expression of gratitude, as if you could make a bow to your own body, say thank you. Thank you for carrying so much, for holding so much as I move through the days and nights. Your body carries so much. Thank you. You can relax. I'm okay just now. You can relax.

Let your body know you're okay just here and now. You can relax. Allow an opening of presence to deepen. Feel the breath breathe itself again for some breaths.

Now bring your attention to the area of your heart—the heart that carries so much. Yes, the physical heart, but much more the heart of feeling, of emotion. Notice all that your heart has been carrying: longings and fear, great love, worry, frustration, excitement, sweetness, sadness, appreciation, doubt, deep love—all carried by this heart, this very human heart.

With mindful loving awareness, just notice how much your heart feels and carries. Notice what's especially strong for it now. Hold it all with tenderness, with loving awareness. As if you could bow to your heart inwardly, say thank you. Gratitude. Thank you for caring so much, for caring so much, for trying to help and protect me. Thank you, dear heart, for all you carry. I'm okay just now. Thank you for trying to help me in all these ways. I'm okay just here and now. You can relax. You can rest. Let your heart be at ease.

Notice the breath again, naturally breathing, each breath caring for your life.

Now, with the same mindful loving awareness, notice your mind—the mind that produces a stream of words and thoughts and pictures and images, plans and memories. The busy mind that keeps active, thinking and imagining, analyzing, remembering, on and on and on like a stream. The mind moving, moving, with all these thoughts and images and pictures and words and plans and memories and ideas. Feel the energy of the mind: creative, sometimes obsessed, analyzing, exploring, opening.

Again, as if you could inwardly bow to your mind, say thank you. Thank you for working so hard to take care of me, to protect me. Worrying and planning and figuring it out. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm so grateful. Thank you, mind. Hold it with tender compassion—this mind works so hard. Say, thank you, I'm okay just now. You can relax. I'm okay just here. Rest in the quiet heart and the breath.

Finally, notice that just as you can bow to your body and say thank you for caring so much, for trying to keep me safe and well—just as you can bow to your heart, thank you for carrying all these feelings and cares, trying to protect me, care for me—just as

you can bow to your busy mind, thank you for trying to figure it out, to keep me safe, to help me—notice that you are not your body. You're not your feelings. You're not your thoughts and images.

You are the loving witness. You are consciousness itself. You are the loving awareness that acknowledges the body, the heart, the mind. Relax into loving awareness. You are the silent, vast witness to it all. Breaths and sensations rise and pass like waves of the ocean. Feelings and thoughts come and go. And you are the loving stillness, the mindful loving awareness—your own true nature. You are consciousness itself, witnessing, allowing, receiving it all in the vast stillness.

You are loving awareness. Rest in it.

Trust it.

It is your home.

When you're ready, let your eyes open and remain connected to the stillness. Remain connected to the deep understanding that you are consciousness itself—witnessing and experiencing this remarkable human life.

CHAPTER 25

Gratitude and Generosity Dharma Talk

Jack Kornfield · 46 min

> *In this heartfelt Dharma talk, Jack Kornfield invites us to discover the transformative power of gratitude and generosity, especially during challenging times. Drawing from his experiences as a monk in Thailand practicing the traditional alms round, he illuminates how the entire Buddhist monastic system is built on trust and mutual care between beings. The practice of dāna (generosity) is presented not as progress toward some distant goal across countless mahākalpas, but as an awakening to the fundamental abundance that is our birthright.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together teachings from diverse wisdom traditions—an Iroquois medicine man's hour-long gratitude prayer, the Iroquois practice of teaching children generosity, and the Zen tradition of offering gratitude for all beings whose labor supports our lives. He explores the three levels of giving recognized in Buddhist teaching: tentative giving, brotherly or sisterly giving, and royal giving—the joyful sharing of our best without reservation.*
>
> *Through moving stories of a nun serving in Peru, a Harvard physician washing the feet of homeless patients, and the work of small but mighty organizations serving refugees, Kornfield demonstrates how our wounds and vulnerabilities can become doorways to deeper compassion. He reminds us that we exist within what Martin Luther King called 'the network of mutuality'—that we belong to each other and somehow know it. The talk becomes a meditation itself, inviting listeners to recognize gratitude not as something we cultivate for joy, but as the very source of joy. As Brother David Steindl-Rast teaches: 'It's not joy that makes us grateful. It's gratefulness that makes us joyful.'*

How do we practice gratitude and generosity in these times, in the midst of all of this? The pandemic—well, we can also be grateful for the vaccines that have been developed. The climate crisis—and maybe we can also be grateful that nations are beginning to come together for what we need. The cries for social and racial and economic justice, all of these things.

Our dear elder and sage, Joanna Macy says the world is not a problem to be solved. It is a living being to which we belong. We are part of this living being—its beauty, its suffering. And our current problems seem almost orchestrated to bring forth from us the biggest moral strength, courage, and creativity in our hearts. I feel that when things are this uncertain and difficult, a person's determination, how we choose to care, to invest

our energy with our heart and mind, can have a much greater effect on the larger picture than usual. So I also find it an exciting time to be alive. Here we are in the midst of it.

Somebody asked Ramakrishna, the great Indian saint, why there is evil in the world. And he replied, "To thicken the plot." You wouldn't go to the movies if it was all just everybody smiling. It had to be there to thicken the plot.

The Buddha, however, never answered those kinds of questions—why, where did it come from? Those were philosophical questions. He just said, "What I teach is simple. There's suffering in human life and its causes: greed, hatred, fear, attachment. And there's a path to the end of it, to a freedom. This is what I offer you—how to pass through the difficulties of human life and find that which is free and compassionate and beautiful in your own heart." This is the offering of the Dharma.

He trusted somehow that people would find their way, individually and collectively. He created a big community and worked with the leaders of the communities of his time, trusting that we as human beings can find a way to live more wisely, more compassionately, more generously and graciously.

The whole monastic order is founded on trust. The way the rules work, especially in the Theravada tradition where our teachings come from—Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka and India and Burma, Thailand—the rule for monks and nuns is that you may not eat anything that was not offered and placed into your hands that very morning. You cannot store food. You cannot grow food. You cannot cook your own food. You have to go out with your alms bowl, or you wait until someone comes to your temple, and you eat what's offered to you.

It was an amazing experience as a monk in the remote parts of Thailand, on the border of Laos, to go out in these very simple and poor villages at dawn and have people waiting to take of the little food they have and place it in your bowl. They would stand silently, reverently, as if to say, "We so value what you carry in our society—the teachings of compassion and freedom. We so value this that we want to share of the little food that we have, even in the poorest seasons and households."

It was an amazing experience to feel that level of generosity, that level of gratitude, and that level of trust. Because you had to trust that you would get enough to eat. And almost always we did. Once in a while we didn't, and so be it. Then the next day we might. But the whole integrated field of Dharma is built on a love and a care and a trust between human beings.

Years ago, I was invited to a big conference at the Menninger Foundation in the Midwest. It was a conference on the nature of consciousness. All the neuroscientists and researchers were there, the usual suspects. And there was an Iroquois medicine man who came and attended. His name was Mad Bear.

When it was his turn to address the assembled conference, he said, "Come out with me to the prairies, to the plains." We went out with him and stood, and he stood up and for forty-five minutes or an hour, he made a prayer. Now that is one darn long prayer, I've got to tell you. I started to get a little bored, a little impatient. Okay, it's nice to have a prayer—when is he going to finish?

The prayer was a prayer of gratitude. He thanked the grasses. He thanked the heads of the cereal grains that grow. He thanked the earthworms and the beetles on the earth and the ants—all that kept the soil moving and moist and open so things could grow. He thanked the birds that flew by and the birds that we didn't see. He thanked the wind and the colors in the sky. He went on and on.

Pretty soon, even to my slightly impatient and irritated consciousness, I realized that this was a gorgeous mindfulness meditation. It was a meditation on gratitude. It was a practice of connecting and engaging with loving awareness all the things around us. And it changed us when we went back into the room.

The Iroquois nation, who offered so many brilliant visions to the founders of the American Republic—there's a lot of history about that—they also had a beautiful way of teaching their children generosity. As I understand it, part of their tradition was to take children when they were three, four, five years old and place them in the center of a circle. First, they would give them beautiful things to drink. Then someone on the outside of the circle would cry out, "I'm thirsty! I'm thirsty! I have nothing to drink!" And the child who had been given so much would say, "Oh, come in! You come in. Let me share my drink with you."

Then they would give the child all kinds of beautiful things to eat. And from outside the circle, a voice: "I'm hungry, I haven't had anything to eat, help me." The child would be encouraged and guided to say, "Oh, there's so much food here, please come partake, please come share, come have some of my food." Then they would wrap the child in warm skins and woven things, and someone would shout, "I'm cold, I'm freezing!" And the child would offer these warm things to them. What a way to raise children—to have that sense of abundance that can be offered.

Now, my three-year-old grandson went out on Halloween this time. It was his first time really understanding it. His mother was pretty savvy because she didn't want him to have this enormous pile of candy that wasn't all that good for him to eat day after day. So, kind of like the Iroquois, he went around—I mean, there's this mysterious thing where you go from one place to another. Talk about a Buddhist alms bowl! He has his little alms, his Thanksgiving pumpkin, this plastic pumpkin that he puts stuff in. And everywhere he goes, people are giving him the best thing he could imagine: candy.

But then his mother explained something. She said, "The way this holiday works"—this was rather clever, I thought—"is you get all this candy and then you wait by the door, and other children come by, and you get to give it to them." So he had this whole big pile of candy, and then he waited, and as the older kids came later, he got to give the candy out to them. He took as much delight in giving it away as he did in receiving it.

In the Buddhist tradition, it says you become a fully awakened Buddha after practicing these great ten perfections for one hundred thousand mahakalpas—a few immensities, these enormous, vast lengths of time. And one of the first of these perfections is the perfection of generosity.

Well, I don't think this is a really useful framing. One hundred thousand mahakalpas, each of which lasts longer than an eon on earth, where you're trying to become more and more patient, more and more generous. How am I doing? "Okay, I've gotten through thirty-four thousand nine hundred kalpas..." The whole notion of progress in that way in spiritual life—some goal out there—can be really problematic for us. As Aldous Huxley said, an idolatrous religion is one that substitutes time for eternity. Some goal, some place you're supposed to be, rather than the eternal present.

But there's another way to understand generosity, and that is as fundamental abundance—that this is who you are. As Rumi says, you, the richest person in the world, could give it all away. Why don't you do this? To awaken to a sense of wellbeing that is your birthright.

Here's a poem from David Whyte called "Everything is Waiting for You":

Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone, as if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witnesses to the hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely even you at times have felt the grand chorus crowding out your solo voice. You must know the way the soap dish enables you, or the window latch grants you freedom. The stairs are your mentor of things to come. The doors have always been there to frighten you and invite you. And the tiny speaker in the phone is your dream ladder to new identities and divinity. Put down the weight of your

aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and see the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I could kind of stop right here. Just this as an invitation and a reflection.

We have this remarkable, marvelous human incarnation with all its sorrows and losses, and with its unbearable beauty and magnificence. Open. Become that loving awareness, the loving witness. You are the consciousness that gets to delight in and suffer through all these things—this human incarnation—and see it all.

And you know that you're not just this body, or these fleeting thoughts or feelings. Who you are is so much bigger—not the small self that we take ourselves to be. You are so much bigger than this.

And it comes out the moment a child falls and is in danger in the street. Everybody leaps to try to get that child out of the way. Why is that? Because deep down, we belong to each other, and we know it.

If you look at the military, the stories are not about the great bravery of soldiers for some ideal, whatever flag they're carrying. They really do the brave things they do because they love their comrades and want to take care of their brothers and sisters. We belong to each other.

Here, a story:

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a veterans affairs hospital. The work was a challenge in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I think they could sense I'm a lesbian. My growing discomfort with their questions seemed only to egg them on.

Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since he had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward, where some patients could become argumentative, even angry and aggressive. I sometimes didn't feel quite safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large

psychotic man approached me in a threatening manner. Just as I was starting to worry, an equally large Vietnam vet with dementia quietly came in between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere. They stood nearby in silence, and I felt safe.

I've retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

We belong to each other. And something in us knows this and wants to help each other.

Every morning after alms round in the monastery, we would do our morning chants—sometimes before we went out, some of them when we came back. They were chants of gratitude and prayers: May I use the food that's offered, the robes that I've been given, the care that I received from others. May I use this in a way that benefits myself and the community around me and all beings in this world. May I receive this with deep gratitude.

Gratitude. The acknowledgment of the countless blessings, great and small, that we receive every single day—with every breath, every meal. Gratitude has a trust, a confidence in life itself. It feels the same force that pushes grass through cracks in the sidewalk, that invigorates and keeps you alive every day.

Gratitude gladdens the heart. It's not sentimental, not jealous, not judgmental. It doesn't envy or compare. Gratitude receives in wonder the myriad offerings of the rain and the earth and the care that supports every single life.

Here is a meditation on gratitude:

With gratitude, I remember the people, animals, plants, insects, creatures of the sky and sea, air and water, fire and earth—all whose joyful exertions bless my life every day.

With gratitude, I remember the care and labor of a thousand generations of elders and ancestors who came before me.

This is a Zen prayer, by the way.

I offer gratitude for the safety and well-being I've been given.

I offer gratitude for the blessings of this earth I'm given every day.

I offer gratitude for the measure of health I've been given.

I offer gratitude for friends and family and community I've been given.

I offer gratitude for teachings and lessons, and for the life that has been bequeathed to me.

As Brother David Steindl-Rast says, it's not joy that makes us grateful.

It's gratefulness that makes us joyful. Maya Angelou captured this beautifully: "This is a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before." That innocence, that beginner's mind.

Several of my friends and colleagues—teachers that you know, I won't use their names—have become gratitude buddies for each other. At the end of a day, they will text their gratitude buddy: "Here are three things that I'm grateful for today." It starts to tune the heart, to begin to look and notice—oh yes, this and this and this.

There's a whole form of therapy in Japan called Naikan therapy that was designed for people who are depressed or anxious or neurotic. Basically, you go on a retreat and begin to reflect on everything that you've been given in your life—from your very first breath and your first diaper and the first milk that you were given, whatever baby food—how much abundance has come into you, and that you are part of this abundance.

Now, let's be real about it. It's not that easy. We all have periods that are extremely hard. We face our own fears and illnesses and confusion and aging and conflicts in our family. And then all this stuff that I talked about that's so present in the culture and in the world—the conflicts.

In Tibet, those who practice meditation offer a prayer to receive suffering: "Grant that I may be given enough suffering that my heart will open and find within me the great heart of compassion." Imagine asking that. You know, we usually pray for other things. Grant me suffering enough that the great heart of compassion will open in me.

Because part of what we have to offer the world, along with our gratitude and our trust, is not how accomplished and wise and thoughtful we are. We offer the world our humility and our presence and our heart—and our brokenness as well.

There's a story of a Maryknoll nun, and this comes out of one of my favorite books ever—Ram Dass and Paul Gorman's book called *How Can I Help?* A brilliant, wonderful book. This woman, a Maryknoll nun, went to be a school teacher in Peru at a school at 13,500 feet. But after a few years living there, she came down with rheumatoid arthritis that gradually contracted her hands so that they were locked in fists that couldn't even be opened. Eventually she came down the mountain, came back to the U.S., and went to the Mayo Clinic to have surgery—not just on her hands, but on all the other places that the rheumatoid arthritis had damaged her body.

When she went back, she could only go to a lower altitude, but she saw some of her Peruvian friends there. They said, "You're the same kind person you have always been. So let's see what else we can do together."

She said, "My ministry changed. Instead of being the teacher, the one who knew, it became a ministry of walking together. Others with physical disabilities joined together to share our experiences. And it turns out our difficulties and pains and weaknesses proved to be teachers of the great mystery, an introduction into which the spirit can be born.

"I found I'd become much more sensitive to others—more touched, more able to listen, moved more by feelings than by concepts and intellectual ideas. I discovered that the more I opened to the pain of others, the more I found in myself a spirit of service. This was true for the others who were disabled as well. Having been brought low, it was a matter of standing humbly as best we could.

"Many of the Peruvians I ran into with handicaps were deeply ashamed and hid. I would come to see them and they would hide in their own homes. But as I moved about, they would gradually come forth. I think of Juan, a polio victim at three who'd been hidden by his family in their small mud brick house until we discovered him at age eight. His brother Julio took us to his home one day, and there was Juan, his twisted legs underneath him, scooting around the small back dirt patio on a circular piece of rubber.

"His mother was suspicious and didn't want us to stay, for a handicapped child meant she was being punished for something. She was ashamed. We returned, I and these others I worked with, on several occasions to visit Juan. One time we found him all alone. His family, with the rest of the town, had gone to a religious procession. Of course, he'd never seen one. So we borrowed a bicycle and put Juan on it and joined in the procession itself. It was his first time outside the house, the first time he'd looked at people from a level higher than the ground, his first procession. His parents were immediately annoyed, but their attitude changed gradually."

And when we thought it was right to raise the idea, we asked at the next town meeting if we could raise money to send Juan to Lima for physical rehabilitation. Everybody liked the idea, and Juan went off to the big city. He had a long, hard struggle with much pain and effort, but one day he returned to the village. He was using braces and a cane. It was very hard for him. But as he began to walk down the street to his home, people came out of their own homes. They appeared from all over. They were cheering and clapping, and they followed him all the way home. It was so wonderful. It was Juan's second procession.

Everybody brings their hurts and their trauma and their magnificence and their mystery and their unbearable beauty, all of it wrapped up. And we can bring eyes of compassion and mercy, tenderness, appreciation to the Thanksgiving table—to the wacky relative and the QAnon supporter and the crabby aunt and the misbehaving children that we all were in our time. And as we did in our meditation, we can bow and say, thank you. Thank you to it all. Thank you that we can all be together.

Because when the heart opens, it is said that even the leaves on the trees become like pages in the holy books. Everything we see is colored by the attention of the heart, by mercy, by care.

I saw this cartoon with several panels. Someone was in trouble and when he gets out of it, he says, "Thank you, Jesus." And then in the next panel, there's a picture of Jesus Garcia. He's got a little name tag on—he's obviously working somewhere, got some job—and he says, "De nada." Thank you, Jesus. Jesus says, de nada.

There's a doctor that I admire a great deal. His name is James J. O'Connell. Dr. O'Connell was a physician trained at Harvard Medical School, and being near the top of his class, he went over to Mass General Hospital, one of the great teaching hospitals in Boston, and became one of the chief residents there. He was highly accomplished. But he'd heard from some friends that there was an interesting problem to solve, an interesting place to go and work—to learn how to work with the homeless population in Boston.

So he decided to go for a month to a clinic that he was directed to, to learn about how to be a physician for those who had no homes, who were houseless or homeless. He went in and met this nurse. Her name was Barbara McInnes, who he later said was the greatest saint he'd ever encountered. But there she was, just an older nurse. She welcomed him. "Hello, doctor. I'm so glad you're going to be with us. We're grateful to have you. I have a little bit of instruction and guidance for you."

"Yes," he said. "You've been doing this a long time. Tell me."

She said, "Well, first, lose the white coat. Take off the stethoscope." Which he did. She said, "And for these first weeks here, what I'd like you to do is to wash the feet of the homeless people as they come in."

Now there's something biblical, if you will, about this story. What does it mean to wash the feet of someone? There's a kind of humility and tenderness in it, but it's a lot more than that. He writes about it, saying that as a physician, all of a sudden he could see so much that was going on for them. He could see the swollen feet and the diabetes and the blood pressure, all these things, because he had time to touch and be with their

bodies. But more than that, he said, he could listen. And as he washed their feet and massaged and tended their feet, they would begin to tell him their stories in ways that he would never have heard anywhere else.

And then of course, Barbara said, "Well, we have to go out on rounds." He was used to hospital rounds from one ward to another. But they got in the van and did rounds under the bridges. She would go out and he would go with her, and she would introduce him to her patients, and they would look at their feet and look at their bodies.

He was so moved by it that he made it his own ministry, his own work, which he's been doing now for twenty-five or thirty years. And he created a program where physicians in training at Harvard Medical School and at places like Mass General and other hospitals around Boston—many, many of them are invited to come and do a rotation and learn what it means to attend to people who are on the streets. Beautiful, beautiful work. And a lot of it is just listening.

We want to talk about gratitude or trust or generosity. To listen is an enormous act of generosity.

And I think about—I've told this story of my beloved Trudy, my wife and partner and colleague, dharma teacher—going to work with this very tiny, but as they call it, "small but mighty" anti-genocide group in Africa. While the big NGOs go in and bring their crates of things, have their Land Rovers, have a whole program of how they're going to help people, what the IACT folks did was go and sit down on the dirt in the desert with all the refugees from Darfur in these huge, desolate desert camps. They sat down with the women and asked, "What do you need? What do you want?"

And the women said, "We want preschool for our kids. We want them to begin to realize that they can learn. And we want soccer. We want our children also to realize they can be part of the world."

And so now in many of these camps, there are these beautiful preschools where the kids are learning practices of mindfulness and compassion, things that IACT has been teaching along with education of language and words. And the soccer teams have grown up. A lot of them still playing barefoot, but they've got shoes and balls and all these things donated from around the world. And now there is a Darfur United team that went to—I forget, it might have been Doha or the United Emirates or somewhere in Dubai—for the World Street Cup Championship. They got new shoes and uniforms, and their whole wish was that they would score at least one goal in this world competition, which they did. And the camps all cheered because it made them related and connected to the world.

This is something that we all can do. Even if we're alone, we can share a smile. We can be grateful when we go shopping and encounter somebody. We are in the network of mutuality, the shared garment of destiny, as Martin Luther King said.

Some years ago on a sunny Seattle afternoon in a park, a young Catholic priest stopped to talk to a parishioner and her five-year-old daughter, Carmen. The little girl had a new jump rope, and the young priest began to demonstrate the intricacies of jumping rope to her. After a while, Carmen began to jump—first once, then twice. Mother and priest clapped loudly for her skill, and eventually the little girl was able to jump quite well on her own and wandered off with her newfound skill. Priest and mother chatted for a few moments until Carmen, with the saddest, wisest eyes, returned, dragging her rope. "Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."

We need each other. And maybe we're put in this world to admire it, to love it, to be grateful for it.

In the Buddhist teachings, it's said that there are three levels of generosity or giving of *dāna*. The first is tentative giving, where you have stuff or things and you say, "Well, maybe I'll need it, maybe I won't. It's cluttering up my house. All right, I'll give it away." There's that sort of doubt. We've all been there. You know what that's like—should I keep it? No, I don't have any use for it. I'll give it to someone else. Tentative giving.

Then there's brotherly or sisterly giving, where you see others as your family. You see them through the eyes of family and you say, "I have this. Won't you share? Won't you also be part of what I have? Let us share this together. We're in this together."

And then the third is called royal giving, like the king or queen who has the treasure house. Rumi says, "Walking out of the treasury, I feel generous. Anyone still sober in this weather has missed the point"—the spring weather. In royal giving, there is the delight of taking the best that you have and saying, "Here, you have this, you share this," because the joy is so great in sharing and in giving.

You can think about it. Those who've been really generous around you—how do you feel toward them? And how does it feel when you've been generous in that way? You can also reflect: what does the opposite feel like? The times when our minds are fearful, worried, miserly, stingy, clinging in some way, hoarding—all those kinds of things. Without being judgmental about it, how does it feel?

Gratitude, generosity, trust. When they are present—which they are in you—when you honor them and allow them to flower, they connect. They bring joy again. As Brother David said, it's not joy that makes you grateful. It's gratefulness that makes you joyful.

Your body isn't yours. And it's not just that I'm saying your consciousness and your spirit will leave the body when you die. That will happen.

You'll see. And you'll look back and just say, wow, that was an incarnation. You kind of look at that whole thing as you float out of your body into the light. You'll see.

But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that you are an organism that is an entire ecosystem with what is now estimated to be a trillion other living beings. The viruses and the bacteria that live not just in your gut, but in every part of your body. Every square inch of your skin has hundreds of thousands and billions of little creatures. The weight of your body—I think it's something like three quarters of your body is not your own cells. It's all these other organisms.

Now you might say, ew, creepy. But guess what? We are life. Breathing, living life. We can't separate ourselves out in that way. That's a fiction. That small separate self, sometimes called the body of fear. Yes, we have to stop at a red light. Yes, we have to remember our social security number. There are things we have to tend to as an individual. But we are in this mutual garment of destiny. This shared mutuality.

And what do we want to do in this life if we're connected with it all? What better thing to do than to love? What better thing to do than to be grateful for it? And you know, when you're with people who have gratitude and generosity, how much delight it brings.

Someone was asked in a classroom, what is it that helps us to see goodness? "I see the goodness on my husband's face when he sees the kids after an out-of-town trip. They all run toward him, Daddy!" "I see the goodness when my youngest son hears the fatigue in my voice and brings me a cup of water. Here, Mommy." "I see it in my wife when she greets the parking attendant or the cashier with such kindness and attention and respect." "I see it when my best friend comes home and hugs his dog with deep affection." "I see it when my husband pulls over to help someone whose car has died and never takes anything for it." "When my partner is tender, willing to stay in relation when things are difficult." "I see it in my five-year-old daughter who says to the sun at sunset, goodbye, I love you."

We have this in us—gratitude, royal generosity. And this season, if anything, is a time to let that shine. I mean, every season is.

I like this poem from Brian Andreas called "Waiting for Signs": "I used to wait for a sign, she said, before I did anything. Then one night I had a dream and an angel in black tights came to me and said, you can start any time now. And then I asked, is this a sign? And the angel started laughing and I woke up smiling. And now I think the whole world is filled with signs. But if there's no laughter, I know they're not for me."

The signs are here, all of it. This is our time on this earth, as Joanna Macy says, for our courage and our love, our wisdom to shine forth. It's our time to serve beyond our fears and small sense of self. It's a time to express this.

There's a song from Idina Menzel. She sings: "At this table, everyone is welcome. At this table, everyone is seen. At this table, everyone matters. No one falls between. At this table, mercy has a seat. At this table, there'll be no judgment. At this table, we're all sons and daughters. There's no better place to be."

Your Thanksgiving table—that's the place.

Your table every night—what do you really want to give thanks for? In the end, what are you grateful for? And if you could do something a little extra generous in this season and this time, what would that be? How might it feel?

May the earth be yours. May the clarity of light be yours. May the fluency of the waters and the ocean be yours. May the protection of the ancestors be yours. And so may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to hold your life.

These blessings from John O'Donohue.

Our meditation, our practice, the Buddhist teachings—they are simply a reminder of who you really are. O nobly born, remember what's possible for your heart and your life. Freedom. Compassion. Tenderness. Humility, because we all have our wounds to share with one another, and our care.

There is a kind of magnificent love that's possible in each person. There really is.

This is who you are.

CHAPTER 26

Setting an Intention of the Heart Dharma Talk

Jack Kornfield · 50 min

> *In this Winter Solstice dharma talk from 2021, Jack Kornfield weaves together poetry, story, and contemplative practice to explore how we might live as bodhisattvas during challenging times. Drawing on Pablo Neruda's "Keeping Quiet" and Wendell Berry's wisdom about the fertile darkness, Kornfield invites us to pause from the ordinary rhythms of life and listen more deeply to what matters.*
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> *Kornfield reflects on the Bodhisattva vows and how they shift our perspective from the small self's concerns to a larger commitment of service. He shares personal reflections from sitting in Ram Dass's room in Maui, where he experienced the vastness of awareness alongside the tenderness of the human heart. Through touching stories—including a teacher who protected a student's dignity, and the remarkable tale of how Dante's love for Beatrice saved the Ponte Vecchio during World War II—he illustrates how compassion and trust can transform even the most difficult circumstances.*
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> *The talk addresses the reality of suffering—pandemic waves, political gridlock, climate crisis, personal loss—while pointing to the Buddha's teaching that suffering is not the end of the story. Kornfield explores the West African concept of each person carrying "cargo" or gifts to deliver to this world, encouraging listeners to discover and offer their unique contributions. The session concludes with a ritual for setting intentions for the coming year, lighting candles, and speaking vows aloud as witnessed acts of commitment to the Bodhisattva path.*

So welcome back. And please let yourself sit and listen in a way that's kind of meditative, we might say. That is, there's no exam at the end, nothing you have to take notes for. Remember, if anything, this is just a reminder to something that you already know in yourself. And if there's something that's touched in you, a reminder that matters, then you can keep it. And if things don't seem like they fit, just let them go. Take it as a practice, even as you listen.

So here we are, 2021, in the Northern hemisphere, the winter solstice. And as most everyone knows, that word solstice means the sun is stopping. We get to feel the turning of the seasons when we pay attention—that music of the spheres. Most cultures, as we know, have some kind of ritual for the solstice: songs, prayers for the light to come

back, offerings, communal gatherings. And of course, all the holy days that we know—Christmas and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and the Islamic holidays and the indigenous celebrations—so many ways that people celebrate.

Because it reminds us that we live by rhythms that are not the rhythms of the internet or the cars or business. There's another kind of rhythm. The great rhythm, the breathing of the world that breathes with our breath and the heartbeat. And so we step out of the rhythm of our ordinary life and pause. The question is not the future of humanity, it said, but the presence of eternity—to listen in a deeper way.

And as we do, we get to look around a little, both inwardly and outwardly. I've been watching the migration of the geese. Trudy and I—my beloved—we live on a lagoon near the San Francisco Bay. And there's not just the migration, but there's a huge owl. I believe it's a great horned owl that's in the oak tree between our house and the lagoon, just a few yards outside our window. And it roosts in the top. It's giant—like the size of E.T. in the movie. It will turn its head almost completely around. It's just astonishing to see it there. And I'm hoping sometime maybe I'll get to see it or feel it when it leaves and then comes back again. My neighbor saw it bringing back some little creature that it had caught in its talons, silently.

There's a rhythm to the world that's happening around us—of the creatures and what Chief Seattle called the beasts of the world—and a rhythm of our own heartbeat, the movement of our life. When we get quiet and come into the present, we can feel the aliveness of this rhythm.

The poem from Pablo Neruda that most of you have heard, but I haven't read for years—I thought of it and I love it. Sometimes it's nice to revisit these things. It's called "Keeping Quiet."

Now we will count to 12 and we will all keep still. And for once on the face of the earth, let's not speak in any language. Let's stop for a second and not move our arms so much. It would be an exotic moment without rush, without engines. We would all be together in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea would not harm whales. And the man gathering salt would look at his hurt hands. And those who prepare green wars, victories with no survivors, would put on clean clothes and walk about with their brothers and sisters in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused with total inactivity. Life is what it is about. If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt the sadness of never understanding ourselves, or threatening ourselves with death.

Now I'll count up to 12 and you keep quiet, and I will go.

An invitation to quiet the mind. An invitation to love and tenderness, to presence.

Now, of course, that all sounds good. It's poetic and gorgeous. He won his Nobel Prize for poetry for good reason. He's the voice of the heart in some way. But it ain't so easy. You know, the advertisements for it make it sound good. But actually, it's really hard when we stop.

We stop and try to sit quietly. And it's like there's a layer of ice that needs to thaw before the water can even move inside. Or maybe it's like there's so much speed in our mind—business and planning and doing—and we try to get still, our body gets quiet. And then it's like in the cartoons when Coyote runs off the cliff and he hasn't looked down yet and his little legs are still going, and then he looks down and goes "oops!" We're somehow suspended even as we start to meditate.

Because when we do sit quietly, as we do sit quietly, as we face the stillness, there also arises—we start to feel the grief that we carry for the sorrows of the world and the immense beauty of life. All of it is there for us when we quiet.

And right now there's the next wave of the pandemic, the spread of Omicron really, really rapidly across the globe. I read that today seventy-five percent of all COVID cases in the US are already Omicron. I think in a couple of days it will be ninety percent. We can't see friends and family in some cases, or have to cancel our travel plans, and schools are closing, stores can't stay open, businesses shuttering. It's really affecting all of us in some deep way. And when we get quiet, we carry all that, because it's there in the field of our lives.

We also are aware of the political gridlock, our longing for something better in the body politic that's not happening. We can feel the weight of the calls for social and economic and racial justice—the continuing racism, the continuing conflict and targeting of people, the continuing economic disparity. We all feel this. And climate change.

So when we sit quietly, there's the stillness and the immense beauty, and then there's also the problems, the difficulties that we share. If we try to hold these in our mind and heart with our small self, our limited self, they're overwhelming. They're just too much

to bear. But if we hold them as the bodhisattva that we are—the great heart of compassion born in you, the being committed to being in this world and to alleviating or diminishing suffering—then all of a sudden it becomes possible.

It's like the poet Ryokan, who wrote, "Oh, that my priest's robes were wide enough to gather up all the suffering people in this floating world." You can imagine Ryokan in his priest's robes gathering everyone up into his heart, saying, "Oh, that I could hold them all in my heart." I put my hand on my heart—you could do the same. You can almost feel this, that this is a different way of holding all that we're going through, the immense beauty and the struggles.

And don't think that it's not the journey. "Go ahead," writes one sage, "light your candles, burn your incense, make your prayers, ring your bells, call out to the gods—but watch out, because the gods will come. And they will put you on the anvil and fire up the forge and beat you and beat you until they turn brass into pure gold."

So we're being asked to be greater than ourselves in this time.

I notice it in myself. This year, at certain points I started to think, "Well, should I be pulling back?" Here I'm seventy-six and a half. I've got hardly—I don't have any unpublished thoughts. I've written a lot, I've done these things, and maybe it's time to just go on a long retreat, to step back. And the world is not as exciting as it used to be. Or maybe I should travel to some more exotic place, or take something new on, or find what will make it fresh.

And then I had this revelation as I was getting quiet and reflecting. Those reflections are about me, the small self, Jack. Am I bored? Have I done enough? Should I do more? Have I fulfilled my job? Whatever. But when I get quiet, I remembered my bodhisattva vows. And I thought, "Oh, it's not about me. It's not about whether I retire or not, or what I do for myself." The bodhisattva vows that I've taken, and that many of us have, are so simple: May I be of service. Whatever gifts I have, may I help to alleviate the suffering of beings everywhere.

And then all of a sudden I felt this lifting of the weight of who I'm supposed to be or what I'm supposed to do—just, "Let me be of service. Let me do something that makes a difference."

But how to do this, how to do this bodhisattva thing? It all sounds very noble.

Trudy and I came back not long ago from leading the legacy retreat that we taught for many years together with Ram Dass. This was the first time without him—it was a year off last year from the pandemic. And I sat in Ram Dass's room. They've made the house where he lived, now called Hanuman Maui, into a temple where you can go on retreat, a few people at a time, and people gather and they chant and they meditate.

And it's quite a beautiful place. I sat in Ram Dass's room, and I'm not that much of a woo-woo person, but it was a surprise how powerful it was. I was sitting and all of a sudden my mind and heart opened to this immensity, this vastness, emptiness—the fertile emptiness from which everything comes, the vast silence behind everything, the universe, consciousness before form.

I don't mean to make it into something out of reach, because you can experience this too. But there was this sense of vast stillness, becoming that awareness itself, that loving awareness Ram Dass talked about. And then as I fell into that vastness, there appeared in the middle of it a heart. You know, when you watch television or YouTube showing open heart surgery and they crack the chest open and there's that amazing pulsing, beating organ of the heart? That's what appeared. There was the vastness and there was this incredibly tender heart.

And I thought about Ram Dass in his life. The great Tibetan sages say, "My view is as vast as the sky. My actions are as tender as barley flour, as minute and careful." Ram Dass—I loved him and he was a sage and he had his own personality and neurosis, which he famously talked about a lot. But he also worked in the AIDS epidemic and sat with hundreds of people who were dying before we had medicine for HIV. He was there for people whose children died. He was there in Nepal and India working with thousands of people, and it turned out to be five million people that the Seva Foundation he helped found restored sight to. That tenderness at the same time.

Though there's suffering in the world, it's not the end of the story. And the inspiration from Ram Dass—there he was in this somewhat broken body after a huge stroke, twenty years in a wheelchair, still unable to move half his body, repeated infections and hospitalizations. People get loyal to their suffering, they focus on it. But he would go once a week on Mondays to swim in the ocean on the other side of the island, and we would join him. They'd roll him down in this wheelchair with giant wheels across the sand, put on a life vest and give him a little glove for the one hand he could use, and float him out into the ocean. And he would be just smiling and paddling away.

Off this beach, there was a buoy in the water. He would paddle out there and there would usually be twenty or thirty hippies with flowers throwing petals in the water, like it was the river Ganges or something. He would get out to the buoy and float there, open his arms and say, "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy." And then he would say, "Oh joy, oh joy, oh joy," until everybody was singing along with him.

When we quiet ourselves, we can see in a new way, as he did, as we can with the heart. And now is the time of darkness in the northern hemisphere. Our farmer poet Wendell Berry says, "To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight and find that the dark too blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings."

So in the pause in this time of the holy days, there's an invitation to the fertile darkness, the holy darkness, the beautiful, wise, tender darkness. And maybe the virus, which is sending us back to our rooms saying, "Okay, you didn't quite learn your lesson yet, maybe you need a little bit longer"—is inviting us to take an even deeper pause and look at our life.

An old man meets a young man who asks, "Do you remember me?" The old man says no. The young man tells him he was his student, and the teacher asks, "What do you do in your life?" The young man answers, "I became a teacher." The older one says, "How good, like me?" And he says, "Yes, in fact I became a teacher because you inspired me to be like you."

The old man, curious, asked what time he decided to become a teacher. And the young man tells him the story. He says, "One day a friend of mine, another student, came in with a beautiful new watch and I decided I really wanted it. I stole it, took it out of his pocket. Shortly after, my friend noticed his watch was missing and immediately complained to our teacher, who was you. Then you addressed the class saying, 'This student's watch was stolen during classes today. Whoever stole it, please return it.' I didn't give it back because I was ashamed and also because I wanted to keep it. You closed the door and told us all to stand up and form a circle. You were going to search our pockets one by one until the watch was found. However, you told us to close our eyes because you would only look for his watch if we all had our eyes shut. We did as instructed."

You went from pocket to pocket. And when you went through my pocket, you found the watch and took it. But you kept moving, searching through everyone's pockets. And when you were done, you said, "Open your eyes. We have the watch." You didn't tell on me. You never mentioned the episode. You never said who stole the watch. That day you saved my dignity forever. It was the most shameful day of my life. But this was also the day I decided not to become a thief, a bad person. You never said anything, nor did

you scold me or take me aside to give me a moral lesson. I received your message clearly. Thanks to you, I understood what a real educator needs to do. Do you remember this episode, teacher?

The old professor answered, "Yes, I remember the situation with the stolen watch, which I was looking for in everyone's pocket. But I don't remember you, because I did my best to keep my own eyes closed while I felt for the watch in pockets as I was looking."

And I learned—oh, this is the heart of teaching: to correct, not to humiliate. If you don't know how to do this, if to correct you must humiliate, you don't know how to teach. And if you do know, then teaching becomes an act and an art of love. Not judging the other, but in the darkness, in the unknowing, seeing with eyes of understanding, trying to understand.

The restorative justice movement in prisons and schools is one of the great exemplars of this, where people get to listen to the person they believed wronged them the most, or the one they've harmed, until very often they come to a heart connection.

Life will test you. Events, loss, death, pandemics, shocks. This past few weeks, our dear friends Gabriel and Katie Stauring, who started the extraordinary nonprofit iACT that does anti-genocide work in Darfur and Sudan—people from there, in Chad and Central African Republic, working with people from Syria and so forth—in the most dangerous places, we worried about them. They came home and they were killed in Los Angeles near their house in a car accident when someone ran a red light. That driver too was killed. They were in their forties. They had three kids. Terribly painful, tragic. And yet they burned bright. When Gabriel first heard about the continuing genocide in Darfur, he said, "I have to do something." Decades ago, he made forty different trips to Africa, gathering people to help refugees. Yes, life will test you as it tested them. And their response was to burn bright.

In this past week, my dear friend Malidoma Somé, West African shaman and medicine man and professor, also died of cancer. And I remember this story he told, that in Africa, when a woman wants to have a child, before she lets herself get pregnant, she'll go sit out under a tree—a beautiful big tree out in the field—and wait quietly until she hears the song of the child that wants to be born. And when she hears the song of the child that wants to come into her body, she goes and teaches it to her lover, and they sing it together when they make love and create this new life. Then after she gets pregnant, she teaches it to the villagers around. So when the baby is born, the midwife and the women gathered around sing the song of this baby to it, saying, "We know your song. We welcome you." And then that song is sung through the rites of passage—the

bar mitzvah or whatever that child goes through in that culture—all the way to the wedding, when both people's songs are sung, to the end of life when it's the very last thing that happens, and those gathered around that person on their last day sing their song to them.

I heard this story and I thought, that's a culture I'd love to live in, where we know each other by our song, where we listen in that deep way.

And then Malidoma went on at another time—and I've told this before here—he said, "In the Dagara people, in my people, we believe that each child is born carrying gifts for this earth. And that their main task is to deliver their cargo." I love that metaphor, because cargo is the word used in West Africa for all those ships that ply the rivers of West Africa and have for centuries. Your task in life is to deliver your cargo.

So when I ask, how do we do this bodhisattva thing? We have to listen: What are your gifts? What is your sense of offering to this world? Like Katie and Gabriel, what do you want to respond to?

How do you find yourself moved and motivated?

To do this bodhisattva thing, you also need to invite a sense of trust. The awakened heart is the same as the trusting heart. Enlightenment is the same as the trusting mind, it says in ancient teachings. Trust. If you don't have it, go look at the buds on the trees around you. If you don't have it, go look at the little green things that are pushing themselves up through the cracks in the cement and the concrete. There is a mysterious unfolding happening right now, always. That's what this life is. It renews itself just as surely as the light will come back from this darkest day of the year in the north.

You can trust inwardly—and I know this from fifty years of working with people in inward processes of meditation, retreats, and therapy—that the inner monsters, the fears and rage and grief and guilt and the things that are stuck there, yes, if there's a lot of trauma they may need to be resourced and supported with safety. But in the end it's not repressing or judging or fighting. It's inviting the monsters into the heart. It's letting yourself open and say, "This too." To allow the rage or the fear or even the sense of dying, to say, "All right, let me open to this change and trust," as I've seen again and again, that when we let ourselves open to that which is difficult, something new will be born. You know this.

The poet Italo Calvino writes, "What is to give light must endure burning." And sometimes we have to go through the darkness. Sometimes we have to go through the fire and endure things. But the heart wants to heal. The body wants to heal. And it turns out even the inner monsters—in the end, even the fears—they want to be loved. It's kind of

remarkable to see it in this inner work. Finally, you get this dialogue with the inner fears and monsters and ask, "Well, what do you need?" And they turn into, "Oh, I just want you to put your arm around me. I want that tenderness. I want to be included too."

But it's not just inwardly, it's outwardly. Inwardly and outwardly.

And you probably know the story of Dante's Divine Comedy, the masterwork of the thirteenth century. An amazing poet. He wrote the Divine Comedy inspired by the woman he fell in love with—Beatrice. It was just before 1300, and Dante spotted this young woman standing on the Ponte Vecchio, this bridge that goes across the river in Florence. It's an amazing, beautiful bridge with all these artworks and shops and various things. And the sight of her lit up his heart and ignited and awakened a sense of love and beauty and something eternal. He only got to speak with her a few times before the plague, the pandemic of the time, took her away. But she somehow became his muse, his inspiration.

Six hundred fifty years later, during World War II, the American army was chasing the German army up the Italian peninsula toward the end of the war. And the Germans in retreat were blowing up everything in their wake, including bridges, to try to stop the American progress. But no one wanted to blow up the Ponte Vecchio because Beatrice had stood on it and Dante had written about it. So the leaders of the German army, some of whom had read Dante and knew this great artist, made radio contact with the Americans and said in plain language that they would leave the Ponte Vecchio intact, but only if the Americans would promise not to use it. And the promise held. The bridge was not blown up, and not one American soldier nor one piece of equipment went across it. The bridge was spared in a modern ruthless war because Beatrice had stood upon it and love had touched Dante. And down through the centuries, it still mattered.

So yes, inwardly, the bodhisattva says, "Yes, I can hold all of this. I invite it all into my heart to be met, to be held, to be loved." But outwardly, yes, there's growing hatred and divisiveness. The bodhisattva sees this and says, "There's a goodness underneath all of this. Under all of this, human beings fundamentally have a good heart."

The bodhisattva honors the truth that everything changes. Remember Mary Oliver saying that to live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your breast as if your life depends upon it, and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

And so the very last words of the Buddha were: All things are impermanent. All things are impermanent. This is the truth.

And the Bodhisattva says, "I love it when it comes, and I love it when it goes."

The Bodhisattva also understands the other truths of existence—that there's suffering in life. It's not a mistake. There's birth and death, joy and sorrow, praise and blame, light and dark, gain and loss, fame and disrepute. Who among us hasn't experienced all of these?

But suffering is only the First Noble Truth. Yes, there's suffering, says the Bodhisattva, but that's not the end of the story. There are causes for our human suffering: greed, hate, ignorance, fear. And there's a path to the end of suffering for everyone's heart—compassion, mindfulness, wise understanding.

And this is who we are. We're being called to this, O Bodhisattvas of the time of change. This is not just a time of change; it's a time of transformation. And it asks us to step out of the small sense of self—what's called the body of fear, the sense of separateness. That's just not true. Instead, we're invited to feel our connection with life itself, and the gifts that we've been given, and the reality that we're not alone, that we're in this together.

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember the spirit that was born into your body, the timeless awareness that is who you are. Take time to listen, to value it. Take time to walk among the trees in nature. Walk by the water and the mountains just to be still. See the rhythms of the oak and the maple, the willows. Take time to meditate.

Bodhisattvas, dear ones, don't fear change and don't fear suffering. They're part of the dance of incarnation. This is us. This is who we are. This is what this life, this human embodiment offers—joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss. Breathe with it. Like the rivers, feelings and thoughts come and go, relationships come and go. You become the loving heart that says, "Yes, I can hold all of this, this greater dance." Dance with it.

And if you need to, heal your body. Forgive your lover or your ex. Tell your story. Write poems. Make art. Find a gratitude partner where you send something every day—a text saying, "This is something I'm grateful for on this very day." Make a meal for someone. Stand up for justice. Feel your gifts. Use what's been given to you so that when you leave, the world is a little bit better because you, the Bodhisattva, were here.

I said that the last words of the Buddha were, "All things are impermanent." But at the very end, he said something else. As he looked into the eyes of all those gathered around him, after forty-five years of walking the dusty roads of India, speaking to everyone about the freedom and great heart of compassion, the nobility of every being that they could remember and find in themselves—he looked at them and said, "Make of yourself a light."

Become that illumination, O Bodhisattvas, and carry it.

Nelson Mandela: "Keep one's head pointed toward the sun and one's feet moving forward."

So simple. Turn your heart, great Bodhisattva, toward the world. Bring your love and your gifts into it.

But before we do it, I want to remind you that in the chat is the link to IACT, which is the name of the little nonprofit that Gabriel and Katie J. Starring began. I've talked about it before. It's really remarkable—as someone called it, a small but mighty anti-genocide group that has now become a model for people around the world who are working with these streams of refugees. They've learned how to listen to them, how to ask what they need, how to bring the very things that illuminate their lives and their hearts. It's really beautiful work. So please, if you can, support them.

Now I'd like to ask you to get quiet for a moment. We will do a ritual—a ritual of setting the intention for the next movement of the spheres, of the earth around our sun. In this solstice time, we begin another journey around our star. It's a good time. You could call it New Year's, the Holy Days, whatever you wish. It's a good time to set the intention of the heart for what matters to you and how you want to live.

So let your eyes close gently.

The Dalai Lama wakes up early in the morning in the dark and chants his bodhisattva vows: *May I be a boat or raft, a bridge to help those cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry and medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary and a lamp in the darkness for all to follow, as long as earth and stars exist.*

That's a very poetic way to say it. But let yourself set an intention or a vow. It's never too late to start over. Today is the perfect day to set the most beautiful intention of your heart. And it could be just as simple as: *I vow to be kind.* Listen. You will know.

Now, whenever you're ready, let your eyes open again. And I'd like to invite you, if you have one, if you brought one, to light a candle—or turn your little battery-operated candle on. Once you've lit it, place it down where you are.

Now take out the piece of paper that you brought with you, if you did, and the pen. If we were all together in the room, we would do blessing chords. We would do a ritual where we turn to one another and read our intentions, because to speak them out loud, to have them witnessed, gives a beautiful power. It's also a tender thing to hear from another.

But for us in this way, we do need a witness. So on your paper, where you will write your vow or your intention, at the top of it I'd like you to write the name of someone who will be your witness. You can say, "In the name of my inspiration"—and it could be your grandmother or grandfather. It could be Nelson Mandela or Greta Thunberg or Quan Yin or Mother Mary. "In the name of Greta Thunberg..." "In the name of Quan Yin, I set this intention..."

Let yourself finish up what you're writing. If there's more, you can add to it later.

And now, when you're ready—Jesse, would you unmute everyone, please? You can all unmute yourself. You now have permission.

Hold your candle up. Let us all read them aloud. I don't know how this is going to work, but I'm very interested—because there's something compelling and beautiful about giving voice to these words from the heart. So go ahead and hold the candle. We are all witnesses, walking together.

[A moment of voices reading aloud]

Well, it was a little cacophonous—like life—but it was still a beautiful thing to do. Beautiful.

So take this paper, put it someplace special. You have the witness, whoever you wrote down. It would be fun to see who you named.

And I'd like to end with a little blessing chant, but first I want to read a poem that I read periodically.

Thirty years ago, a woman named Lynn Parks came to a Monday night class—a poet who lived in Marin who has since died. To explain one line in her poem: she had brittle bone disease, which means that as a child, many times when she fell, she broke her bones. She said she broke her bones fourteen times as a girl.

But here's her poem:

Take the time to meditate, to pray.
It is the sweet oil that eases the hinge into the garden
so the doorway can swing open easily.
You can always go there.
Consider yourself blessed.
The stones that break your bones will build the altar of your love.
Your home is the garden.
Carry its odor hidden in you into the city.
Suddenly your enemies will buy seed packets
and fall to their knees to plant flowers in the dirt by the road.
They'll call you friend and honor your passing among them.
Give everything away except your garden.
Your worry, your fear, your small-mindedness—
your garden can never be taken from you.

And just as the rain falls on all things, nourishing them with its sweet water, beings everywhere welcoming the rain. Just as the full moon we had last night shines its luminous silver light on all beings—so too may the good intentions of your heart and all the actions of the bodhisattva that you are, the small and tiny acts of kindness, may they gather together like raindrops into rivulets, into streams, like the moonlight that illuminates even the darkest of nights. May they gather together into rivers and return to the ocean of well-being, to nourish and support and bring blessings to you, to all you care about. May they bring well-being and happiness. May your life become a blessing to yourself and to this world.

May it be so.

I am so grateful to be together with you in this way. This soul's retreat has been really special. I thank you for your stillness and your prayers, your meditation and your vows, your kind attention, and the fact that we get to have this shared communion together of teachings and compassion.

Be well. Take care of yourself and those around you.

And I'll see you in the new year.

CHAPTER 27

Nourish and Connect Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 27 min

> *In this guided meditation offered at the time of the winter solstice, Jack Kornfield invites practitioners to settle into what he calls "loving awareness"—a quality of consciousness that witnesses all experience with kindness and spaciousness. Taking one's seat "halfway between heaven and earth," the practitioner learns to observe the breath breathing itself, recognizing our fundamental connection with all living beings who share this breath.*
>
> *Kornfield offers a gentle approach to working with the thinking mind, noting that "the mind produces images and words, it secretes thoughts the way the salivary glands secrete saliva." Rather than struggling against thoughts, he suggests meeting them with the phrase "I love it when it comes, I love it when it goes"—allowing thoughts, feelings, and moods to rise and pass like waves of the ocean. This reflects the classical understanding of vedanā (feeling tones) and the changing nature of all mental phenomena.*
>
> *The meditation culminates in an expansion of peaceful presence outward to all beings, using the beautiful image of a violin's strings resonating sympathetically with another instrument. Drawing on the spirit of the brahmavihāras (divine abodes), Kornfield suggests that by finding stillness within ourselves, we naturally offer blessings of peace that "resonate across the universe." This practice integrates mindfulness of breathing with mettā (loving-kindness) in an accessible, heart-centered approach suitable for practitioners at any level.*

Let yourself get ready to sit now in meditation in whatever way is comfortable for you. Taking your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this remarkable human form, this human incarnation. Sit with a sense of graciousness and ease, upright so there's a sense of presence, but also relaxed.

Perhaps if you're ready, let your eyes close gently or lower your gaze and take two or three long breaths in and out. Take your time to release whatever wants to be let go of in this moment.

Here you take your seat amidst the great turning of the spheres, the time of the solstice. Let yourself become loving awareness itself, a mindful loving awareness. In a simple way, if it's helpful, you can begin to feel how the body is breathing itself with all other beings—the in-breath and rising of the belly and chest, the out-breath all happening on their own. You can relax and calm with each breath, a loving awareness.

First, as you sit, just let things settle, simply, graciously. As you feel the body breathe into breathing with all life, breath shared with all the other creatures of the earth, relax and trust. It knows how to breathe. It knows how to nourish and connect, and you can come to rest.

As you relax and feel the breath come and go, there will often be a stream of thoughts. The mind produces images and words. It secretes thoughts the way the salivary glands secrete saliva. It just does it, kind of wondrous. When you notice the thoughts becoming predominant, as if to bow to them with your loving awareness, you can say to yourself: I love it when it comes, and I love it when it goes. Just let them come and go like waves of the ocean. Rest quietly just where you are.

Just as the breath breathes itself, you can rest here and now in the reality of the present with life breathing you. And just as the waves of thought will arise—pictures and words—you can notice them with loving awareness. Oh yes, the thinking mind, planning mind. As if with a bow: I love it when it comes, I love it when it goes.

You are the loving awareness, the space of awareness itself, consciousness, the witness of all that arises and passes. Rest in mindful, loving awareness.

Just as the breath breathes itself, this breath rising and passing, just as thoughts—picture thoughts and word thoughts—appear and disappear, and you are the witness, the loving awareness, notice too the feelings and moods that can arise like waves of the ocean. Sadness, excitement, longing, love, fear, anger, contentment, joy. Let each rise and pass as it will, like the breath itself.

You are the loving witness. Loving awareness, just here at ease. Gracious. Silent.

If you like, you can put a half smile on your lips, as Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh recommends. You sit as the Buddha that you are, the wise being, the compassionate one, resting in loving awareness. Rest in it. Letting all things appear and disappear. I love it when it comes. I love it when it goes.

Quieting, centering. With each breath, an invitation to ease, calm. You are the loving awareness itself—consciousness witnessing the breath and the rise and fall of experience. Silent and open.

As the ease and peace deepen, let yourself sense or feel or imagine that it can spread from you in every direction, like the violin that's placed on the table whose strings resonate with another violin being played in the room.

May the resonance of peacefulness and stillness, steadiness amidst all the waves. May the stillness of your heart, its steadiness just now, spread out in every direction and resonate the strings of the hearts of all beings, near and far, that they might find a deeper quiet, a loving presence, and inner well-being and peace amidst all things.

Being peaceful even for a moment, you naturally offer your blessings for peace and well-being that resonate across the universe.

And now let yourself imagine the sound of a big and beautiful bell being rung to signal the end of the meditation and to send out with its sound the same waves of peace and resonance and beauty across the world.

Let your eyes open when you're ready.

I'm so grateful we get to sit quietly at this time of the great turning. Sit and listen—calm, steady, loving awareness.

CHAPTER 28

Compassion in a Time of War Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 25 min

> *Jack Kornfield offers a tender guided meditation on karuṇā (compassion), one of the four brahmavihāras or divine abodes. The practice begins by cultivating compassion for someone dear, acknowledging their struggles and sufferings, then receiving compassion back from them before turning that same care toward oneself. This reciprocal flow of compassion opens the heart with both tenderness and courage.*
>
> *The meditation then expands outward to embrace all those caught in the world's conflicts—in Myanmar, Eritrea, Sudan, Ukraine, Libya, and beyond. Kornfield includes a moving poem by John O'Donohue as a prayer for those suffering violence, those working for peace, and even those who profit from war. Practitioners are invited to become beacons of compassion, radiating care across time and space to mothers clutching children in fear, the elderly and sick, youth conscripted into battle, farmers, healers, teachers, and poets.*
>
> *This practice speaks to the profound Buddhist understanding that we are interconnected—that even a small offering of compassion, like a pebble in the ocean, touches the whole. The session concludes with a sense of collective practice, as if all participants are holding hands together, opening hearts as prayer and blessing. It offers both a refuge for one's own sorrows and a way to respond to the suffering of the world with presence, strength, and an open heart.*

You can relax and let go and feel fully supported just where you are. Steady. Strong. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

With this embodied presence, let's begin with a practice of compassion.

Let yourself think of someone you care about where it's relatively easy, not terribly conflicted—someone where there's a natural sense of love and care. Tenderness. Picture them, remember them, sense them, feel them in any way you can. Let their spirit, the sense of this one that you care about, be seen and felt. Just now, feel your connection and how much you do care for their wellbeing.

While you can wish them well and send them loving kindness, let yourself also be aware of the struggles in their life, as in all human lives. Let yourself sense the sufferings or the struggles, the fears or pain, the difficulties of their life. And because you care about them, notice how immediately there arises a sense of compassion—the heart being touched, moved by their struggles and your care.

Then extend this compassion to them with simple phrases of well-wishing: May you be held in compassion. May your struggles or sorrows be eased. May you be safe and protected. And may your heart be at peace. May your struggles and sorrows be eased. May you be held in great compassion. May you be safe and protected. May your heart be at peace. May your life be at peace.

With these practices of compassion and loving kindness, you can alter the words so that they express your care in any way that works.

Now imagine this dear one, this person who you care about, could gaze back at you. They gaze with the same loving care, and you feel the connection. And they say, just as you have offered compassion and well-wishing, "I want to offer it back to you." They gaze at you and say, "I see your struggles and sorrows. May your struggles and sorrows be eased. May you hold yourself in great compassion. May you be safe and protected. And may your heart be at peace and your life be at peace. May your struggles be eased." They say, "May you be held in compassion."

You take in their care for you and maybe even put your hand on your own heart. Because they so want this for you, they care about you. You receive this and say yes. May I hold myself in compassion. May my struggles be eased. May I be safe and protected. May my heart be at peace. May my life be at peace. May I hold myself in compassion for all the struggles of life.

Feel this. The heart opens with tenderness and care and courage. Strength and compassion.

Now think of another person who you care about. Picture them, this other loved one or person that you care about. Feel the care, the love that's there. Again, let yourself be aware of the measure of struggle or sorrows in their life—what they struggle with as a human being. Feel the tender compassion that arises. And again, extend the compassion in whispered words from the heart: May you be held in compassion. May your struggles be eased.

May you be safe and protected. May your heart be at peace. May your life be at peace.

And sense how you can open your heart, one after another, to extend the field of compassion. You can be like a lamp that shines this compassion now, out from your own consciousness and heart, across time and space. Feel the struggle of others.

And for this evening, let's extend our compassion and spread it to all those who are caught up in the wars of the world—frightened, lost, suffering. To mothers holding their children, clutching them in fear. To those who are old and aged or sick. To the youth. To those in the wars of Myanmar and Eritrea, of Sudan and Ukraine and Libya. To the young men and women being conscripted and drawn in. To the farmers and healers, to the teachers, merchants, and poets all caught up in war.

And this poem from John O'Donohue, extended with your compassion:

As the fever of day calms toward twilight, may all that is strained in us come to ease. We pray for all who suffered violence today—may an unexpected serenity surprise them. And for those who risk their lives each day for peace, may their hearts glimpse providence at the heart of history. That those who make riches from violence and war might hear in their dreams the cries of the lost. That we might see through our fear of each other a new vision to heal our fatal attraction to aggression. That those who enjoy the privilege of peace might not forget their tormented brothers and sisters. We pray that the wolf might lie down with the lamb, that our swords be beaten into plowshares, and no hurt or harm be done anywhere along this great holy mountain.

And let yourself envision those who are struggling in all those places named and beyond, young and old. And from your heart, extend the wishes and prayers of compassion in every direction to them. Held in compassion—all, all, all.

May your sorrows be eased. May you be safe and protected. May your heart find peace. And may your life find peace.

And staying present as a beacon of compassion, breathe gently, and with each breath extend the care, the courage, the tender compassion and strength. For some, it will be like radiating from your heart a sweet and luminous energy of compassion to surround beings everywhere. For some, it will ask and invite you to picture the farmer, the mother with her child, the old ones, the teachers and poets and healers, the youth caught up in war. Sense that they might feel this and know this from you, as if we were connected across time and space. For we are. And even a pebble tossed in the ocean changes the whole ocean.

So let your prayers and compassion touch the heart of all. And feel how it's as if we're all holding hands together tonight—holding hands and extending compassion, opening our hearts as a prayer and a blessing, and a deep connection.

Thank you, dear ones, for practicing together with me and everyone else. I needed that. Maybe we all need that in some way. It feels so important and simple—to stop, to quiet the mind, tend and open the heart, and offer the connection and compassion and love that is so natural to us.

CHAPTER 29

A Peaceful Heart in a Time of War and the Legacy of Thích Nhất Hạnh

Jack Kornfield · 54 min

In this heartfelt tribute delivered shortly after Thích Nhất Hạnh's passing at age 95, Jack Kornfield weaves together the Zen master's profound teachings on peace with reflections on war and human suffering. Drawing from personal encounters with Thích Nhất Hạnh at Spirit Rock and other gatherings, Kornfield shares intimate stories that illuminate the teacher's remarkable presence—his walking meditation that made 2,000 people gasp in recognition of what true presence looks like, and his gentle response when asked about collective karma: "It didn't happen to the Vietnamese people. It happened to all of us."

Kornfield explores Thích Nhất Hạnh's genius for making profound teachings accessible, from the Ānāpānasati Sutta's breath practices to the complex doctrine of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), which he rendered as "interbeing." The talk addresses how to work with Māra—the forces of doubt, fear, and aggression—through acknowledgment rather than resistance, offering tea to our difficulties while not letting them stay too long. Central to the teaching is the understanding that whatever seeds in consciousness we water will grow.

The practical message is clear: meditation is not about complacency but transformation. We must change our lives to live from gratitude, love, and fearlessness rather than grasping and fear. As Kornfield reminds us, quoting the Dhammapada, "Better to conquer yourself than a thousand men in battle." The talk concludes with an invitation to become the Department of Peace ourselves—to embody the brahmavihāras of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity in a world burning with suffering.

Tonight, I had planned to talk about Thich Nhat Hanh, the great and wise Zen master and teacher who died just about a month ago at age 95 in his home temple in Vietnam. But it also seems critical to acknowledge the grief of the war in Ukraine. And so in Thich Nhat Hanh's honor, I start with a story.

Back in the 1970s when I was coming and going from Thailand and living there at times for some years as a monk, there was a lot of conflict in the streets of Bangkok between the military dictatorship that had taken over the government and the protesting students. There were barricades in the center of the city, not far from the grand

palace and the government buildings. The fighting had escalated so that students had been shot and killed, Molotov cocktails were being thrown, and it was really getting terrible. There seemed to be no way to deescalate it.

And then one morning, probably starting very early in the dark, a meditation master from one of the forest monasteries called together his monks and nuns. They traveled to Bangkok and walked on foot along the way. After dawn broke, they simply stood in their robes silently with their bowls between the two lines—between the soldiers and the government side and the students on the other side. They stood and stood and stood for a good part of the day, just peacefully. Then finally they left.

Somehow their presence of peace was powerful enough, the respect for the robes and for what they carried of the treasures of the Buddha, that everyone took a breath. The negotiations between the students and the government and military leaders began to take a new turn, and after that, an avenue to peace was found.

So here we are again with a war in Europe, in Ukraine. But of course, our media tends to be Euro-North American centric, much of Western media, and very white-centric. In fact, there are wars going on in Burma, all in the ethnic states, and war in Eritrea and Ethiopia, continuing in Libya and South Sudan and Mali and so many places. It gets off our radar, but it's happening—as we acknowledged in our compassion meditation. It's happening to grandmothers holding their grandchildren. It's happening to young people being conscripted or losing their chance to make a life, to farmers and poets and merchants.

So let's take a breath and pause, as we did in our compassion practice, and hold all those places and struggles in our heart.

In some way it seems so foolish, almost astonishing, that people would do this. And yet, and yet we do as human beings. So now our heart cries, we have grief and tears and shared sorrows and care.

I was with Thich Nhat Hanh at a gathering at one of the Zen centers on a particular day of his teachings. One of the students wanted to ask him about karma. They raised their hand and said, "Thay"—which was what he was addressed as, his teacher—"is there such a thing as collective karma? Why did the Vietnam-American war happen to Vietnam?" Where we dropped more bombs on these little countries—Cambodia and Vietnam and Laos, each country like the size of Michigan or Wisconsin—more bombs than the entire of World War II, millions of tons. Why did this happen to the Vietnamese people?

He paused and his eyes got very soft. He looked back and said, "It didn't happen to the Vietnamese people. It happened to all of us."

That is the deeper truth. As it says in the Buddhist teachings and elsewhere in the wisdom teachings of the world, in war there are no victors. Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. In one of the first verses of the Buddha, he says, "Better to conquer yourself than a thousand men in battle." I'm leaving it in the masculine, even though I often will change it to make it more inclusive, but I'm sorry to say it's more accurate.

It's easy to get caught up in the war, if you watch the media, as if it's a video game, in the kind of heroism of it. Here are these Ukrainians armed now with Javelin and Stinger missiles to bring down helicopters and blow up tanks. I could even feel myself get a little excited—yeah, fighting for the underdog there. And then I realized in a moment that there are young men in each of those tanks, or young women but probably young men. There are young people in those helicopters. Nobody is excluded from that suffering.

"Promise me," says Thich Nhat Hanh, "this day, while the sun shines upon some part of the earth, promise me—even as they strike you down with a mountain of hatred and violence and crush you, even as they dismember you—remember, brother or sister, humans, men, women, are not our enemy. The only thing worthy of you is compassion, invincible, limitless, unconditioned. Even as you face this, a smile will bloom like a flower. For when you face the beast of war with your courage intact and your eyes kind and your smile blooming as a flower, those who love you and behold you across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying will bow as well."

He saw this. He lived in it.

Wisdom says don't look at the results, but look at the causes and conditions, because it's not this war, that war, those people doing it. It's us. The three trillion dollars spent every year on military in this world—the US is by far the largest of these, spending more than the next nine countries all put together. We are also the largest exporter of weaponry in the world, way more than anybody else, sending killing machines of all kinds to countries all over the world, and then worrying, why aren't we safe? We have defunded the State Department. We have refused the repeated efforts, starting at the time of the Constitution from one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush, who wanted to start a Department of Peace parallel to the Department of War.

And year after year, people have proposed a Department of Peace in Congress, only to have it ignored or voted down. There has to be a better game than war for human beings. Competition, yes, but some other way. We sell all these weapons for our trade balance, to import cheaper goods or luxury goods. Who are we? What is our moral center?

So when we look at war, we have to look at the war in ourselves as well. What to do? What can we do? In a world, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, burning with suffering and hatred, what must we do? And his instruction is very simple: to stop. Probably his best-selling book of all is *Being Peace*. Out of his hundred books, this carries the voice of being peace—to stop making enemies wherever they are.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian dissident and poet who was in the gulags in Siberia, who suffered tremendously, wrote: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

To stop making enemies. I think of the Ukrainians—I had great-grandparents who came from Kiev and parts of Ukraine. And how many Jews in Ukraine were killed during the Holocaust? Huge numbers. And yet they have a Jewish president now.

As that prayer from John O'Donohue that I read to you: "As the fever of day calms toward twilight, may all that is strained in us come to ease. May those who enjoy the privilege of peace not forget their tormented brothers and sisters." That the wolf might lie down with the lamb, that our swords be beaten into plowshares, and no hurt or harm be done anywhere along this holy mountain.

Stop making enemies. Make prayers, make blessings. This is our moral task. It's really the task of our human hearts. You know it, I know it, we know it together.

I was recently on the campus at Spirit Rock. It's the middle of the two-month silent retreat, and it was just beautiful to see—people walking quietly, people sitting in meditation. The campus is mostly closed to outsiders to keep it safe and protected. And when I was there reflecting about teaching tonight, I remembered the times that we hosted Thich Nhat Hanh.

One of the times he came, there was a gathering—perhaps two thousand people flooded into Spirit Rock. We had built a platform for him to teach, with big loudspeakers and so forth, down near the stream where the current dining hall is. And people sat up on the hillside all the way up to where we now have the upper retreat hall—two

thousand of them. Thich Nhat Hanh's monks and nuns sat on the platform, passed out apples, and had people pause and slowly eat and taste and savor the cloud and the sun and everything in that apple. It was beautiful—to sit quietly and get prepared for Thich Nhat Hanh and his teaching.

And then all of a sudden, I felt something happening and I turned around. I'd been looking from that stage up to all two thousand people. And there, a hundred yards back, perhaps a hundred fifty yards back, Thich Nhat Hanh had appeared on the road, walking toward us. He walked so slowly and with such dignity and presence. He talks about walking meditation, letting each foot kiss the earth. And as he did, I could feel all two thousand people go: "Ah... oh... oh my heavens... that's what it's like to really be present, to carry a sense of peace and attention and love."

It says in the Dhammapada that the perfumes of rose bay and sandalwood and jasmine travel only as far as the wind. But the perfume of goodness, of the heart of a being, of their goodness, spreads far and wide, arising even to the heavens. And there was a kind of sweetness and perfume, peacefulness and strength, just in Thich Nhat Hanh's presence and his steps.

Being with him at one teaching he was giving, a number of us who were in the role of Buddhist teachers gathered with him at Green Gulch Zen Center. As he was teaching mindfulness and attention to breath and so forth, he talked, as he often did, about putting a half smile on your face, of breathing in with ease and breathing out with joy. He talked quite a bit about joy. But the strange thing was that as I sat there near him and listened to him, I started to feel sad and grief in my heart, even as he spoke of joy. I was confused.

So later we had lunch together, and I sat near him, and I said, "Thay, I'm confused."

You talked about joy and bringing a smile and happiness into meditation. But as you did, I felt this wave of sorrow and grief. And what I don't know—because we pick up things from each other, you know how that is—what I don't know is, was it mine or was it yours?

His eyes again got very soft. And he said, "I've seen so much suffering. That's why I must teach joy. Why I must do it."

You know, he started that school during the Vietnam-American war, not taking sides—North or South—bringing the youth together for social services to serve everyone. And a number of the young people he gathered were killed. If you can imagine bringing people who love you, people you care about, to do something meaningful—and then they are killed.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders—like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. You must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, anytime."

So suffering, the First Noble Truth of the Buddha, is not the end of the story. There are also the Noble Truths of the causes and the path to the end of suffering. And that path is not a grim duty that one has to do. As Thich Nhat Hanh invited through his poetry and presence, he said it's like the soft spring rain, the breezes that blow, the causes and conditions that make these happen. It is a happiness that is unborn. There is a vastness and a silence. And this is your birthright. This is your true home.

He said, "This is where you will find me. I am vastness and silence and love."

Thich Nhat Hanh had a major stroke about five or six years ago. He was in France at the time and taken to the hospital, where for some months he was given intensive medical care. He could hardly speak anything, could perhaps only move one arm a little bit.

Then he came to San Francisco. He was brought here by some folks who really loved him and were inspired by him. He had a group of monks and nuns with him, and they were staying in the city. Trudy, my beloved wife, and I would go and sit in the mornings there sometimes. In the living room of one of these big houses where Thich Nhat Hanh had been staying, they had set up a kind of meditation hall or zendo. People would sit—those around him, some of the monks and nuns, a few visitors—and then he would be wheeled in.

This was the last day before he was to return to France and eventually return to Vietnam. He was wheeled in and we all sat. When the bell rang at the end of the sitting, out of that very deep silence that was present, Thich Nhat Hanh raised his head and looked around. He couldn't really speak much at that point at all.

He looked at us. Trudy described it this way. She said he was looking with two different eyes. One eye was an eye on eternity—outside of time. After his stroke, here he was, ninety years old, just seeing the vastness and the play of birth and death, joy and sorrow, human incarnation coming and going. An eye on eternity.

And the other eye peered at each one of us, so present, and nodded as he could—because he knew everyone in the room. *Oh, you. And you. I'm about to leave for France. Oh, I see you. I am present. I am with you. You are with me.*

This is where he lived: in the vastness and in the reality of the present moment, with mindful, loving attention to each moment and each thing, with care.

One aspect of Thich Nhat Hanh, part of his brilliance, was that he was able to take ancient teachings—sometimes very deep teachings—and make them really simple. Some of it seemed to come through his love of children, as you could see in that photo we had at the beginning of the meditation. There he was, holding hands with the children, doing a walking meditation.

He explained that sitting in meditation is like having a glass of that kind of unfiltered apple juice that's sort of cloudy. If you place the glass of unfiltered apple juice on the table and just wait quietly, gradually the particles will settle. Pretty soon it will become transparent and clear, and you can see through it. So he said to the children, "Let yourself settle like the glass of apple juice."

Or another time he said, "Let yourself become a pebble that's thrown into the river, slowly sinking to the bottom, resting there, even as it's caressed by the water that goes by."

He invited the children, and the child of spirit in each one of us, into the reality of the present, into the moment of eternity, which is now.

When you sit and meditate, when I sit, practicing compassion, mindful loving awareness—one thing we can do is to step back in a moment to acknowledge what's happening. Here are the thoughts, here are the emotions. We can even name them. Sadness. Excitement. Planning. All the things the mind is doing, all the emotions of the heart. And when we name them gently, we can become that vast perspective that's not caught and not identified, that just says, "Oh yes, this is worry, this is love, this is longing, this is analyzing and planning, or anxiety, or creativity, this is grief."

We acknowledge it and we become the space—the heart space of loving awareness, of mindful loving awareness itself. For this is who we really are. And in a moment, we can remember this and be free.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? It is actually, in a moment, and it's fantastic. But then—ah yes, there's the rub—we start to see how the mind is untrained. And even though we can step out and step back and disidentify and not be so caught, the freight train of thoughts and plans and memories and emotions starts up again, or continues, gets full, fills our consciousness.

So the second thing is that we can train the mind. And here Thich Nhat Hanh invites us to use the breath, that most central teaching of Buddhist mindfulness. He adds his own flavor, which comes from the Anapanasati Sutta, the text on training the mind and heart with the breath, where he uses the phrase: "Breathing in, I calm the mind. Breathing out, I sit with ease." Or different versions of that—calm and ease—inviting beneath

all the busyness of the mind the attention to settle, the body and mind to come together, the steadiness of concentration to grow so that the disturbances on the surface of the ocean are distant from the deep stillness that can come underneath them all.

This training of the mind to settle and focus and quiet and concentrate is another dimension of our meditation and a tremendous gift, because it allows us to be really present for each thing. Making art or writing a poem or writing code or driving or playing golf or making love or doing business or looking in the eyes of those around us or taking a walk with each step, quite present. Vast perspective. Training of the mind. Settling. Focusing.

And the other dimension is to understand that mindful loving awareness is not about complacency. Once you quiet the mind and open the heart, there's one other pesky little thing that you have to attend to, dear ones, and that's called your life. You have to change your life. You have to change the rhythm of your life and the inner dimensions of it so that you notice when there's lack of forgiveness or grasping or fear, anxiety, confusion. Instead of living from fear or grasping or frustration or anger, you more and more turn to live from gratitude, from love, from fearlessness.

You become the bodhisattva embodied. You take those bodhisattva vows—may I be of service to all, may I help alleviate the suffering of beings—and you embody them in your life.

"Despair is an insult to the imagination," says Wade Davis, the wonderful anthropologist and writer. Despair is an insult to the imagination. Because what's possible for you and me and human beings is freedom, gratitude, love, fearlessness. We can learn it, we can embody it, and we can teach it to others.

And Thich Nhat Hanh, unlike the traditional role of many monks and nuns, chose to speak out against war, to travel, to become a peace activist in ways that the Buddha did at times in his own life. He pleaded with all he could see, starting in Vietnam, and of course in his famous relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, for us to stop the war—to stop the war inwardly and outwardly.

One of the precepts that those who followed Thich Nhat Hanh and his order would take: "Aware of the great suffering caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, understanding, and compassion in our lives, to promote peace education, mindful meditation, mediation and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and the world."

How could it be that we defund the State Department? How could it be that we don't create a Department of Peace?

But what Thich Nhat Hanh also said was this—as the Buddha put it in his phrase, "To conquer oneself is greater than conquering a thousand in battle." You must always start with yourself.

I remember teaching with Thich Nhat Hanh at a big conference at UCLA. There were probably two thousand people and we were alternating teaching in the morning and the afternoon. It was on Buddhist and Western psychology in part. It was a weekend, a decade or fifteen years ago, when the US was about to bomb somewhere in the Middle East. I don't remember exactly, because we are a warlike nation, I'm sorry to say, and we've done a lot of harm in the world.

And so many of us had been part of demonstrations, going out as I will myself again, standing up with the people of Ukraine, wearing black armbands. There was a whole group of us in that hall who had been out in demonstrations, and we were about to do a walking meditation—two thousand people slowly and mindfully walking in a circuit around the UCLA campus.

So I said to Thich Nhat Hanh, "Thay, why don't we give out black armbands to everyone so that we can also stand against the bombing?" I knew he cared about this so much. And he paused and he said, "No." He said, "When we walk, we just walk. When we walk, we're not demonstrating for or against anything. We become the peace that the world needs."

This was part of his message—to not make enemies anywhere. In meditation, he described sitting and taking tea with Mara. You all remember who Mara was: the Indian god, or whatever form of being, that came when the Buddha was seated under the tree of enlightenment. First came all the temptations, and the Buddha was unmoved. Then came the armies of Mara with all their aggression—all these things that you meet, by the way, if you happen to come on retreat at Spirit Rock. Mara is waiting for you as you sit. And then Mara came in the form of doubt, until the Buddha finally touched the earth with his hand and called on Mother Earth herself to bear witness to his pure heart, to his ability to awaken. He raised his hand and touched every spear and flaming arrow with the heart of compassion, and they turned to flower petals at his feet.

But it turns out in the Buddhist texts that Mara comes back forty more times during the Buddha's life. And each time, the Buddha recognizes him: "Oh, is that you, Mara?" And Mara then goes away, generally speaking. Once in a while there's a little negotiation. Near the end, in the last year of his life, Mara says, "You've lived a long time. You've succeeded in everything you wanted. You have a sangha and community—

laypeople, monks, nuns. Isn't it time to hang it up?" And the Buddha said, "Yes, within this year it will be the end of my life." So they had a little dialogue, but mostly: "I see you, Mara." And Mara goes away.

Thich Nhat Hanh took this and told a beautiful little story, as he did. The Buddha is sitting quietly with his attendant Ananda nearby, and then someone lurking nearby approaches—it's Mara. Ananda tries to get rid of him. But the Buddha says, "Wait, is that my old friend Mara who's come? Would you set up some tea for him, Ananda?" And they sit together and talk about their lives. The Buddha says, "It must be very hard for you to be Mara all the time." Mara says, "Yes, it's a really terrible job." And the Buddha says, "Well, it's not that easy being Buddha either. Let me tell you what they do with my teachings." And so they talk in that way, and then Mara goes on his way.

But Thich Nhat Hanh said, when Mara comes, you might serve tea a little bit, but don't let him stay very long. Mara of aggression or greed, Mara of uncertainty or self-doubt—all these forms of Mara. You can take tea; you can even say to your anxiety and your fear and your self-doubt, you can even bow as you sit quietly in their presence and say, "Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me," to your anxiety. "Thank you for trying to take care of me. I'm okay just now, just where I am."

And as Thich Nhat Hanh said, the present moment becomes a wonderful moment. When you let yourself see Mara come, acknowledge, and go—who you are is the Buddha, unshaken and unmoving, compassionate and wise for all.

One of the greatest gifts of Thich Nhat Hanh was this profound simplicity of taking the most complex teachings—for example, the teachings of dependent origination with the twelve links, *paticcasamuppada*—and translating it as interbeing. His famous poem says: in this sheet of paper is the tree from which it came and the logger who cut the tree down, the rain that gave nurturance to that tree, the earthworms in the soil that let its roots drink deep, the wife of the logger who made the sandwich for lunch that day when he cut the tree down, and the people in the mill. In this paper are rain clouds and storms and sunshine and human beings, mechanical equipment—everything is in this paper.

He showed in the simplest way the very deep truth that we need to know. The deep truth that we are interconnected—with the pandemic, with the calls for racial justice and economic justice, with climate change—we are interconnected.

There's a beautiful essay in the new version of *Being Peace* that was just published, a kind of preface by one of our most beloved and celebrated elders, Jane Goodall. She talks about how she never had the chance to be with Thich Nhat Hanh, but reading and seeing

his words touched her so deeply, she said, because while he was there teaching interdependence and not making enemies anywhere in Vietnam and around the world, teaching peace, she said, "There I was in Gombe and I was seeing the interdependence of all life in the same way. Between the trees and the chimpanzees and the other animals that lived on this land, the movement of the sun and the rain—I immersed myself until I became part of that landscape and part of that life in my consciousness in ways that I'd never known before."

And she writes about how important and how critical it is to have this sense of preciousness and wonder and connection at this time, especially with the global climate crisis—that we are not separate.

Remember that poem from David Whyte, where he says, "The great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and see the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."

And I love this poem from an Aboriginal elder in Australia. Of course I can't read it with his words and accent, but I'll try to read it to you because it has that same consciousness that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches and that Jane Goodall embodies, and that you can remember because it's true. It's from Bill Neidjie, an Aboriginal stockman, road worker, song man, whose long stream of poetry-essay is titled "Story About Feeling." He chants and sings about belonging:

"Well, I'll tell you about this story, about story where you feel. Listen carefully this, you can hear me. I'm telling you because earth, just like mother and father or brother of you. That tree, same thing. Your body, my body, I suppose. I'm same as you, anyone. Tree working when you sleeping and dream. That star, you working there, see? You working, I can see. Always at night, if you lie down, look careful. He working, see? When you sleep, blood he pumping. So you look, he go pink, he come white. See him work, he work. In the night you dream, you lay down. That star he working for you. Tree, grass, working for you."

And it's so extraordinary because he uses that word "e"—sort of genderless, you know, it's not you or he or something or she, it's "e," it's us.

Thich Nhat Hanh was a great world teacher, and he combined the Mahayana tradition of Vietnam and Zen and some of the most profound Mahayana teachings of the Mind Only School with the Theravada teachings they also had in his center. Some of his teachings weren't that simple. If you look at a book called *Transformation at the Base: Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness*, it's one of the most profound essays on the nature of mind that a teacher has offered in modern times.

And underneath it, the principle that he proclaims again and again is: whatever seeds in consciousness you water will grow. So this asks for your reflection. Are you watering seeds of forgiveness? Are you watering seeds of generosity? You can, you know. Are you watering seeds of patience? Of compassion? Of wonder? For what you water will grow. Kind of amazing. Our human incarnation, our consciousness is like this. This is part of the depth of what the Buddha saw and offered as a way for us to awaken, to awaken the wise heart, to live with freedom.

Of course, this is not just hagiography about a saint. He was also human. And one of my favorite stories about Thich Nhat Hanh: he was going to give teachings on the Brahmaviharas, the expressions of the awakened heart—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and peace or equanimity. He started to give a series of talks and people were sitting there in his center, listening to him, because these are famous teachings that all the traditions hold. It's like, "Okay, he's giving these teachings. We've heard him talk about love and so forth."

And then halfway through the first lecture, or maybe at the beginning of the second lecture—because they're set as chapters in the book—he changed from talking about love in the abstract. He said, "She was eighteen years old when I first saw her walk down the steps in the temple in Chu Lai, North Vietnam." And he talks about falling in love with this young nun.

And all of a sudden people were sitting up, paying attention. Oh, he's telling a story, and it's the real deal—because he was human, just as all of us are.

He was so upset by the bombing that the United States had started, so angry, that he wouldn't even travel to the US for a while. The trauma he carried from being under those bombs in Vietnam was simply too much. And he could be tough. There were conflicts in his community—conflicts between some of his senior students and him, conflicts between the monastics and the laity, between the Western students and the Vietnamese students. But it didn't matter. He carried the great medicine, the medicine of a free heart. That's who he was.

When he first came to San Francisco Zen Center, there was a kind of—how to say it—if not disdain, then a looking down on Theravada mindfulness practices, viewing them as second class compared to the poetry and rigor of Zen practice, which was considered non-dual. They thought mindfulness was somehow dualistic: "I'm going to become mindful." And Thich Nhat Hanh went in and said, "You don't understand. Zen is mindfulness. That is what Zen is—the capacity to enter so fully into the present moment that you become that which you see, that you recognize we are all of it."

The abbot of Zen Center at that time said Thich Nhat Hanh was like a cloud, a snail, and a piece of heavy machinery. I love this description—a cloud, a snail, and a piece of heavy machinery.

He was a gateway, a door to the infinite, an invitation for us to remember who we really are, to vastness and awakening. He was a Buddha field and a magnet. You could feel it. You can even feel it as you listen to me now and remember, as you hear these words, because he is here.

When he died, there were all the memorials and beautiful things written, and he was shaking his head even after death because he had written beforehand: "People will tell you I died. It is not true. I have never died." He said, "Look at the clouds in the sky. They become rain. They become snow. They enter the land and the rivers and return to the oceans. And then the sunlight on the ocean brings them back up to be clouds in the sky. A cloud can never die. And neither can I. I am you. I am in you." All of his teachings. I am you, and you are me.

Just as Thich Nhat Hanh made himself a beacon of peace, just as he would not take sides yet at the same time, with tremendous courage, stood up for peace everywhere, wherever he could—he spoke, he stood, he walked, he did all the things that would contribute to peace—you can do the same. I will. I'll see you there.

To stand up—and it's not just one place. Yes, I may stand up for those in Ukraine and those in Eritrea and those in Myanmar, as I have in other places, to offer our hearts. But we can also support the creation of a different world: a department of peace, the training of those who mediate, who understand the power of deep listening and nonviolence that Thich Nhat Hanh taught. We can work toward the elimination of oppression and injustice. We can become the Department of Peace. And that is the invitation.

Natthi santi parang sukhang—there is no higher happiness than peace, says the Buddha.

So let's sit quietly for a minute. Just take this in and become it. Breathing calm and ease. The mind quiets. The heart softens. And we become a being of compassion and peace.

Thank you for your good hearts, for your kind attention, for your connection to one another, to Spirit Rock, and to all the other good things you are connected with.

Thank you, and good night.

The heart softens. And we become a being of compassion and peace.

Thank you for your good hearts, for your kind attention, for your connection to one another and to Spirit Rock and all the other good things that you're connected with.

Let's just stay where we are.

Thank you, and good night.

CHAPTER 30

Open, Spacious Awareness Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 27 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield invites practitioners to discover the peaceful heart that remains steady amidst the eight worldly winds (lokavipatti)—praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Drawing from both Buddhist wisdom and Taoist philosophy, he points toward a way of being that is centered and unshakeable, able to perceive universal harmony even when difficulty arises.*
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> *The practice begins with settling into the body and breath, then gradually expands awareness to recognize our interconnection with all breathing beings. Kornfield guides practitioners to identify not with the body, thoughts, or emotions, but with consciousness itself—what he calls "mindful loving awareness." This vast, sky-like awareness becomes the container for all experience, allowing thoughts, feelings, fears, and longings to arise and pass like clouds without disturbing the essential peace beneath.*
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> *The meditation culminates in the cultivation of compassion (karuṇā), connecting to the Buddha's own gaze upon beings caught in confusion and suffering. This practice offers a direct taste of equanimity (upekkhā) combined with tender-hearted care—two of the brahmavihāras that form the foundation of an awakened response to life. Whether new to meditation or deeply experienced, this guidance offers a pathway to rest in one's true nature as loving awareness itself.*

Let yourself find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable, where you can sit upright with a sense of alertness, but at the same time, a graciousness and ease, like the king or queen on the throne. You take your seat here halfway between heaven and earth in this human form and invite a sense of stillness and openness.

Tonight our meditation practice will have the qualities of equanimity and compassion. To begin, I invite you to reflect on the value of a peaceful heart. What is it like to have a peaceful heart among the worldly winds of praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, fame and disrepute, birth and death? These are the worldly winds that constantly change. To have a peaceful heart in the midst of them all —steady, spacious, open. This is the invitation.

As it says in the Tao, there's a time for being ahead and a time for being behind. A time for being in motion and a time for being at rest. A time for being vigorous. A time for being exhausted. A time for being in danger. A time for being safe. For she who is

centered in the Tao, she can go wherever she wishes without danger. She perceives the universal harmony even among the arising of pain and loss. For she has found the vast space and peace and rests in the Tao.

Let things quiet. Let the body begin to settle. The shoulders relax. The arms and hands rest easily. Let the eyes and face soften, loosen the jaw. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well to receive all that arises with a spirit of compassion.

As you sit quietly, you can notice how the body breathes itself. This organism, this human body, this human incarnation, expanding, contracting, breathing in and out. Notice as you tune into the breath that the air is not just inside you, but all around you coming in and out. There's an ocean, a vast sky. And the breath is breathing in and out in the ocean and the vast sky—the shared breath that is breathed by all living beings.

When you breathe out, it becomes part of the in-breath of the little girl getting put to sleep in your neighborhood, and the raccoons who play with your trash cans, and the deer in the hillsides. Breathing together.

With each breath, allow the sense of vastness and openness to grow. Make your mind like the sky, without boundaries, vast, open. You become the space of loving awareness, of mindful loving awareness that feels how the body breathes itself, inter-breathes with all life.

You are the space of awareness through which float thoughts and images and words like clouds. Just as the breath comes and goes, rises and passes, so too the clouds of thoughts appear—words and images—and then vanish. You are the vast stillness. Mindful loving awareness like the sky.

Love and longing may appear and disappear. Fears and worries can arise for a time, feelings and thoughts, and then they vanish. You are the vastness, the vast space of mindful loving awareness. This is the peaceful heart—the vast open heart, open mind.

You are not this body. You are not the thoughts or feelings and emotions that arise. You are consciousness itself. You are the loving awareness. The consciousness that was born into this body—timeless consciousness, vast and open, taking many forms, yet not limited by them in any way.

Rest in loving awareness. Rest open.

Allowing for all things, yet not limited by them.

You are the Buddha resting in vastness, seeing the arising and passing of all things with a great heart of compassion—peaceful in the midst of it all.

Let your mind be open like the sky: peaceful, compassionate, and tender, allowing for all things to rise and pass. You are the wise and compassionate witness to it all.

From a place of vast peace, the Buddha surveyed the threefold world with the eyes of compassion and saw beings who are lost and confused in fear and greed and hate and anger, causing suffering for themselves and others. And he let the vast space of awareness be filled with compassion to hold them, to teach as many as he could, to remind them of who they really are—their innate nobility and freedom—and to send compassion and love and blessings in every direction, as you can do now.

May we rest in vast compassion and wisdom amidst it all.

CHAPTER 31

Peace is Possible | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 45 min

> *In this deeply moving talk, Jack Kornfield addresses the challenge of maintaining a peaceful heart while witnessing the suffering of war, pandemic, climate change, and injustice across the globe. Rather than turning away from these realities, he invites practitioners to hold them with vast compassion while remembering their true nature as loving awareness itself.*
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> *Drawing from his experiences as a monk in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era, Kornfield shares powerful stories: Ajahn Chah's monastery as an "island of peace" amidst conflict, a temple in Vietnam featuring Buddha and Jesus with arms around each other's shoulders, and Lao soldiers on opposite sides of a civil war taking turns bathing in the same stream. He references Solzhenitsyn's profound insight that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart, and the Buddha's teaching that in war there are no victors.*
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> *Kornfield explores the three vipalāsa (illusions) that entangle us—the illusions of permanence, ownership, and sustainable pleasure—and how meditation practice helps us see through these distortions. Citing Thich Nhất Hạnh's teaching that one calm person can show the way for everyone to survive, he emphasizes that inner and outer work must go together. The talk concludes with a call to plant seeds of peace through truth and reconciliation, conflict resolution, and social-emotional learning, reminding us that we carry the medicine the world needs and that we are "the ones we've been waiting for."*

I was reflecting on what to speak about tonight, and I wanted to talk about vastness and space. But even as I started to make notes for myself, the war kept creeping in. It just didn't want to be ignored.

And here we are. We could start with Charles Dickens' extraordinary sentence: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In many of our cases, we have considerable well-being in our lives, and at the same time there are these wars going on for thousands and millions of people. We can watch the Oscars—I'm glad that CODA won; it's an amazing movie—but then we change the screen and we see the children of Mariupol or Kharkiv, and the incredible suffering. Heartbreaking.

So I want to reflect together tonight, because it's not just the heartbreak of the war in Ukraine. "Long have you suffered," said the Buddha, "from conflict and war." It's the pandemic. It's climate change. It's the wars in so many places—as we know, in Ethiopia

and Tigray, in Libya, still in Syria, in Myanmar. We could go on down the list. And then there are the cries for justice: economic justice, racial justice, continuing racism in the world, continuing economic insecurity for so many.

And now we have Russia again as our big enemy. There we go. For a while it was the immigrants, or the Mexicans, or the Central Americans, or the gays, or it's the anti-vaxxers, or it's the vaxxers, or it's the radical liberals, or it's the white supremacist conservatives. Now Russia's our enemy. Enemy du jour, I think we should say. And the military industrial complex is very happy about this. It's been tough not having a really good enemy to fight.

We're a country that—when I looked it up before this talk—if you talk about regime change, depending on the list, we have meddled in twenty, thirty, forty, eighty different countries. From Iran and Chile, from assassinating Patrice Lumumba, from the Philippines, from countries across Central America, from Iraq—we have toppled the leadership in country after country. We, the peaceful American people. This is part of what Eisenhower called the military industrial complex, where we voted to defund the State Department, not to create a Department of Peace, and upped our military budget to trillions of dollars over the years—and then worry why we don't feel safe.

So how do we practice in these times? Because this is where we are as human beings. How do we navigate? The media, of course, tries to hype things up and exacerbate fear and anxiety and polarization. And the results are anger and depression.

If you read the Buddhist texts, one of the interesting things is that Mara—who, as most of you know, is the god who personifies greed, hatred, and delusion, who came to attack the Buddha as he sat peacefully under the Bodhi tree the night of his enlightenment—returns after the Buddha's enlightenment forty different times in the texts to try to hook the Buddha or bother him or challenge him. Almost always the Buddha says, "Oh, is that you, Mara? Are you back again?"

Here's what we don't want to hear. I could weep when I say it. There is no easy fix to this.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn—who was two generations before Navalny, who is now in a Siberian camp—was one of the greatest Russian writers, himself thrown into a camp in Siberia. He said, "If only it were all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

It's not just the enemy out there, the enemy du jour, whoever it happens to be. It's also that within our own hearts.

My friend Roger Walsh, who is a spiritual seeker, MD, PhD, psychiatrist, and various other things—in his multiple studies, he read the entire Encyclopedia of World Religions, trying to understand them, from Ahura Mazda at the beginning to Zoroaster at the end. I asked him, "Roger, what did you learn from that?"

He said, "I saw that in these hundreds of religions, with hundreds of billions of followers over the years, they all had creation stories. They all had stories of good and evil and how we should behave. They all had stories of the place of human beings and the environment and the cosmos—all kinds of beautiful, wonderful stories. And by the end, it was very clear that there were all these stories placed upon the mystery. There wasn't the right story. We're actually living in this extraordinary, vast mystery of consciousness and human life. And we explain it to ourselves because we're storytelling creatures."

But as the great mythologist Joseph Campbell said—and I had the fortune of teaching with him at Esalen back in the day—if you want a myth, you should make it really big, or maybe none at all, because that's how big the mystery is.

But here we are. This is also called samsara, the cycle of suffering that follows grasping and greed, fear and anger, hatred and ignorance and confusion. These become the seeds that keep it going, and we can see it in the world. As the Buddha says, in war there are no victors. Because it happens to everyone.

What then? How do we practice?

I remember when I was living in the forest monastery at Ajahn Chah's, in a province that borders Cambodia and Laos, toward the Vietnamese end of southern Thailand and Southeast Asia. There was a big U.S. air base right nearby, so we would often see bombers and fighter jets fly over on the way to Vietnam or Cambodia.

One day we had a visit from some folks I knew about. They were a group—I think they were Quakers or international peacekeepers—who had gone to volunteer and live in Vietnam during the war, trying to make peace between people. They were really brave and beautiful. They said, "We can't stand by. We have to do something. We are going to go there."

They came into the monastery burned out. They'd been in the middle of so much conflict, and it was really hard. They were looking for a little respite, but they also complained to Ajahn Chah. They said, "There's a war going on and you all are just sitting on your behinds meditating. What about taking care of the world? What about compassion and action?"

But they stayed for a while—ten or twelve days. Ajahn Chah didn't even answer them at first. He said, "You stay here for a bit. We'll talk about it." That was his beautiful answer, really.

What they could see was this: if you live in a war zone, everything is in danger. The temples were being destroyed. Things were being stolen. People turn against one another. There's so much fear and violence. And this monastery was an island of peace and sanity. There might be some fighter jets flying overhead on occasion, but you could lose your gold ring and someone would find it, save it, put it on the altar so that you might get it back. You could find yourself lost at night and people would go and help you. It was a place of peace and love.

As Ajahn Chah said to them later, it was a living library of what was possible. "Wars come and go," he said. "And around here, we've seen a lot of wars. We need to show that there is another way."

He continued: "We human beings are constantly in combat, at war to escape the fact of being so limited—limited by so many circumstances we cannot control, things that we wish were different. But instead of escaping, we continue to create suffering, waging war with evil, waging war with what is too small or too big or too soon or too late, waging war with what's too short or too long or right or wrong, courageously carrying on the battle."

"It's time," he said, "to stop the war."

And we know where the war starts. It starts in the human heart. To make your own heart a zone of peace.

I remember when I went to a temple in Vietnam during the middle of fighting in the Mekong Delta—I don't remember which year it was, maybe 1969 or 1970—visiting the temple of the peacemaking monk known as the Coconut Monk. On this little island, it was peaceful, and you could see the helicopters and firefights on the horizon. All the signage and all the teachings proclaimed this a place of peace. At the far end of the island, on a hill, there were two very tall statues, maybe forty feet tall.

I was used to seeing long reclining Buddhas and great standing Buddhas in these countries. But these were two statues—one of Buddha and one of Jesus—and they had their arms around each other's shoulders, as if to say: yes, there's a war happening, but there's another way.

You know how often I quote Thich Nhat Hanh: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

So make your heart a zone of peace. Set your compass to your highest or deepest intentions, because this is what's given to you as a human being.

"Others will be cruel," said the Buddha. "We shall be kind. Others will kill living beings. We shall protect living beings—thus we will incline the heart. Others will steal. We shall be generous—thus we will incline the heart. Others will engage in harmful sexuality. We will respect sexuality—thus we will incline the heart. Others will speak falsehoods and malicious gossip. We will speak truth that is of benefit—thus we will incline the heart. Others will be greedy. We will be generous—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will be unmindful. We shall establish ourselves in mindfulness and compassion—thus we shall incline the heart."

This is what's possible. And the thing is, we know this. Part of what's so heartbreaking in seeing the wars in so many places and the violence—I went up to the battlefront in Laos. I was still in the Peace Corps, working on medical teams in the villages, tropical medicine, mostly malaria but also some typhoid and leprosy programs. I had a friend on the other side of the Mekong River who was in the international volunteer force, which was probably run by the CIA since the Peace Corps wouldn't go into Vietnam or Laos during the conflict. He asked if I wanted to go up to the front, and being young and foolish—young men always ask, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?"—I said sure.

So we commandeered a jeep and drove through the mountains. It was the narrow part of Laos, which means it's only about a hundred miles or so from the Mekong River to the border of Vietnam. We drove on this dirt road through the mountains and little villages and came to a hilltop above a stream where the Royal Lao Army was encamped.

I met the officer, a major running that encampment. We talked some about the war. He had a good little library—books about revolution in different places, how they'd won, who lost. He was pretty sophisticated. We sat down and he poured us tea. I asked how things were going. He said it was pretty quiet, but now that we'd come it was almost afternoon, almost bathing time.

He went out on the bluff and shouted across the stream to the encampment of the Pathet Lao, the Lao Communist Army. "We're going to take our bath first today, all right?" And the guy on the other side called back, "All right, sure." So the men went down, put on their bathing cloths, washed in the stream, and came back. Then they called out, "Okay, it's your turn," and we watched the soldiers from the other side come down to bathe.

The Lao culture is a very peaceful culture—which shows what we can make in this world. That's the beautiful thing, and part of the point of the story. Behind the Pathet Lao communist army on the other side were Vietnamese soldiers who were quite fierce, pushing them forward. And behind us, on my side of the Royal Lao army, across the Mekong River, were the encampments of the US Special Forces pushing the Lao to fight in that direction. These guys knew it was a proxy war. It actually had almost nothing to do with their country, and they didn't want to do it. They knew in themselves that it was not the right thing.

War can sound noble. There are all these heroic myths—the Trojan War and the rest.

Or you read of Genghis Khan or the Mongols, or read Sun Tzu about war, *The Art of War*, or you read and learn the mythologies of the Incas and the Aztecs on war, or the Ashanti—Tano, who's the god of war in Ashanti culture in West Africa—or you read the Bhagavad Gita, a spiritual text about war. It makes it sound heroic.

But there are other stories.

I was living in a monastery for a while on the Malay Peninsula. During this time when I was a monk—this would have been 1971, '72, something like that—there was still a lot of armed conflict, not only in Laos and Cambodia, but in Thailand and the mountains. There were what they called terrorists. That's the generic term for the ones you don't like, but sometimes they do wreak terror. Sometimes, sometimes not. But anyway, there they were, the communists—they had different names for them.

Ajahn Chah was kind of a peacemaker abbot. He would go and do blessings on all the soldiers on the different sides and give them protective amulets to wear. But still the firefights continued.

One night it came really close to the temple. The temple was in a rubber forest in the Malay Peninsula mountains, and you could see the flashes from the guns at night. It was pretty close. The next morning we got up, did our chanting and meditation and so forth. Then I was out in a little meadow, a clearing really, doing some walking meditation. There was an old monk there, a local monk, who was sitting. I saw helicopters come onto the ridge about a mile or mile and a half away, and you could see them dropping canister bombs—these explosions would happen.

I said to the monk, "Oh, it looks like they're bombing those communists, or whatever they call them, who came down, who they were fighting with last night."

He shook his head. He said, "Oh, there's no communists there. They live in the caves about thirteen kilometers north, that way around in that valley. That's where they are."

I said, "Well, why are they bombing up there then?"

He said, "Well, if they kill them all, who would give them the helicopters and all the equipment and all the money?"

How about that? How about that? It really makes you want to weep.

Like the friend I know who was working as the executive assistant for the head of one of the biggest oil companies during one of these wars. She said the thing that surprised her most was that the company was selling oil—it was the Vietnam War, still back then—selling the oil to the South and to the North. Big surprise.

Oh nobly born, say the Buddhist texts, remember what's possible for you as a human being.

Here's the problem. The brilliant biologist E.O. Wilson at Harvard put it this way: human beings have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike powers. That's where we're stuck. Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike powers.

And yet, oh nobly born, something in us knows there's another way. We know it's possible, as William Butler Yeats, the poet, said: we can make our hearts and minds so like still water that beings gather around us that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life, because of our quiet. We can become that place of peace.

So what to do, dear bodhisattvas who you are, dear beings committed to the ending of suffering?

There are the outer responses. I have friends who've already gone to Poland to work on the border and support refugees. Friends who went to work with World Central Kitchen, one of the most beautiful organizations feeding hungry refugees around the world. Friends who are there as translators, friends who are there offering teachings, friends who are there working with Doctors Without Borders.

But of course, it's not just there. It's Myanmar and it's Darfur, which is still happening, and the conflicts in Latin America and Tigray—I don't need to go down the list—and Libya.

So the first response is to tend the wounds and feed the hungry and stand up for peace in whatever way you can, welcome the refugees, engage yourself in the politics of the time in a way that makes a difference.

But there's also an inner response needed.

There are three *vipallāsa*—the word in Sanskrit or Pali—illusions that we have.

One is the illusion of permanence—that you think things will last. And yet the very last words of the Buddha, some of his very last: all things are impermanent. You may want them to stay the same. You may want the country, the people, the culture, the world to stop and remain as it is, to keep what you have.

A poem from the New Yorker:

What now? There's a magnificent sand castle that's taken years to build, a row of pink seashells for gables, rooms of pebble and driftwood. This is your life. Then comes the affair, the nagging blood work, a freeway pileup. The tide moves in, the water eats your work like a drove of wild birds. There's debris, a tatter of seagrass. I'm here to tell you the tide will never stop coming in. I'm here to tell you whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful.

And that's where we could weep, because the world itself is sacred and beautiful. And yet we cannot hold on to it. This is where we started in our sitting: praise and blame, gain and loss, war and peace, pleasure and pain, birth and death. The illusion of permanence. It is not permanent. All is impermanent like the tide.

Then there's the illusion of ownership—that there's someone, you, who thinks you own your body. Good luck. You can take care of it, please. Take care of your car too, and your garden and your neighborhood. But you don't own it. If you owned it, it would do

what you want, right? "Don't get old." It doesn't work that way. The whole sense of self and ownership is a fiction, constructed. We are part of a whole. We are consciousness itself playing in these different forms. And none of it can be owned. It comes and goes.

And then there's the illusion that we can sustain pleasure. This is a great one in this country, especially with Amazon. I love it actually, I have to say. I know it's not really great and I'm politically incorrect, but you go on, you see something, one little click—buy with one click—and the next day it appears. It's like Santa Claus and a magic genie. Of course, there's a lot of destruction involved in all of that too. But this is our culture: keep the pleasure going. Try to avoid loss, pain, sadness, the end of things. Blame death.

So these are the illusions. From the text of the Dhammapada: "Your body is like a fragile jar. Make your home in the untroubled heart or mind. Your body is like foam, a wave, a shadow of a shadow. A bubble, a mirage—this world, a dream. Escape the king of death. Let go of this body and this attachment and these dreams. The wind cannot overturn a mountain, and neither praise nor blame can overturn the heart of one who has let go. Few cross the river. Most are stranded, running up and down on the riverbank. But the wise, who harm no one—they release anger and fear. They live in love and do their work, inner and outer, and make an end to sorrow."

O nobly born, remember that you have the capacity for a peaceful heart.

Amidst it all. The world longs for this. You are loving awareness. You are consciousness itself. You are the witness to all of this. And even now, as you practice, as you meditate, you can invite this sense of vastness, of equanimity, of a peaceful heart.

You step out of the small sense of self, out of the body of fear, out of all the dramas. That doesn't mean they're not there. You worry about people you love, you worry about places you love, you worry about people you don't even know. All that is human and natural. And you can hold all of it in compassion, vast compassion. But don't forget who you really are. You are loving awareness itself. Don't get caught in the dramas of the wars and keep them going.

James McNeill Whistler, the acclaimed painter and artist, attended West Point as a cadet in his early years. As part of the training there, cadets were supposed to sketch military campaigns and strategize their execution. Being a good artist, Whistler was asked to do a drawing of a bridge across a river—the implication being that this would show how the army could cross to the other side and continue its conquest. He drew a scene somewhat bucolic. He made a nice stone arch bridge over the river. And then he drew a little boy with a fishing rod, fishing off the bridge. The commandant of that class saw it and said, "Get that boy off the bridge."

So he redid the drawing. He put the little boy with his fishing pole sitting on the bank of the river and let the bridge be what it was. The commander said, "Get that boy out of the picture." So Whistler redrew the bridge and the river, and where the boy had sat on the riverbank, he put a little headstone, a little tombstone. He then quit.

That's really the moral of the story. Something in him knew it was not the right place for him. And I don't mean that as a put-down of West Point particularly, more than anything else. But there's something in us that knows there's another way. The children who are in danger in Kiev, in Darfur, the Rohingya children—they're all our children.

Steven Pinker, who wrote *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*, the anthropologist, philosopher, and historian at Harvard, claims through his statistics and charts—and they're actually quite impressive—that we're doing better as human beings now than we ever have. There are fewer wars. There's less slavery. There's less terrible treatment of children and women. Oh, there's still slavery. We know this. We know women are mistreated. We know there's still war. But when he charts it, it's declining. There's less of these things. He said we are perhaps evolving, in fits and starts, slowly. We're in a time of great transition—as a globe and as a species. The climate, the pandemic, the injustice and racism—they're all pressing on us to live in a different way.

And if you live with a peaceful heart, the point is not to let your heart get hardened, not to turn your gaze away, but to see another possibility. To see it with a great heart of compassion, and see it fresh, and say: we don't have to do this.

One of the very first neuroscience studies ever done about Buddhist meditation was conducted in the 1960s by two researchers in Japan named Kasamatsu and Hirai. They did an interesting study about habituation. Normally, when something repeats itself in our consciousness, after a while we become habituated to it—we start to ignore it and move on to other things. You all know how that happens. Sometimes it's even the voice of somebody you live with—but I shouldn't say that. It can be all kinds of things that we grow habituated to.

What they wanted to study was whether the training of attention affected that habituation mechanism—because it's a strategic mechanism in our nervous system, designed so that we don't have to keep paying attention to the same thing over and over again. It allows us to be more attuned to things that might be dangerous or might be an opportunity. You can think way back: if you heard a clattering in the tree, looked out, and discovered it was just a limb banging against another branch, you'd realize it wasn't dangerous. Then you'd hear the clattering, but you'd ignore it.

The research that was so interesting was that they brought in some senior meditators and hooked them up to electronic monitoring. And the meditators didn't get habituated. Each time a certain stimulus came, other people—those they had simply sit and be quiet—after a while, they'd hear a piece of music or a sound or a voice. When they heard the same thing over and over again, they started to ignore it. You could see in the brain signal there was just a flattening. But the people who were meditating and had practiced—there was a beginner's mind of freshness each time.

Now is the time for us to look afresh. "It is better to light a candle than curse the gathering darkness," say the prophets—to foster a wiser society. Even though Mara will visit, and Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that we have tea with Mara on occasion, we need to vote for a department of peacemaking. We need to bring social and emotional learning more fully into education everywhere. We need to learn truth and reconciliation as a way of living in our communities, and conflict resolution.

The foolish look at events, says the Buddha, and the wise look at causes. We need to plant the seeds of wellbeing and respect to make a wise society where those who are vulnerable are cared for, where there is genuine justice. It may sound impossible, but I think we're improving. I think Steven Pinker is right.

Henry Moore, one of the greatest sculptors of the twentieth century, said, "The secret of life is to have a task, a vision, something you devote your entire life to. And the most important thing is it must be something you cannot possibly do." He's talking like the Bodhisattva who takes the vow: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to bring liberation to them all"—to end suffering.

We have the possibility, we have the capacity, dear ones, to embody what we care about, to live it and make it come alive in our own hearts, to be that zone of peace. How we respond when conflict arises around us, in our culture, in the world—to plant seeds of goodness. As we do so, we become—I think Alice Walker coined the phrase—"We are the ones we've been waiting for." You are the ones you've been waiting for.

In the marketplace, in the family, in community and business, let there be respect and healing, wisdom. Join with others. We can't do it alone.

Together with my teaching colleague and friend Tara Brach, I have started an online offering called Cloud Sangha, because one of the most frequent questions I've been asked over the years of traveling around the world is, "How do I find a teacher?"—especially if I live in Des Moines or Tampa or Belfast, Ireland. How do I have a teacher? And it turns out one of the blessings that's come from the pandemic, where we've learned to connect online, is that we can make connections with teachers for people around the

world. Through Cloud Sangha, you can sign up for small groups lasting several months or a year and become part of a weekly gathering of eight or nine people with a teacher—to talk about your life, your practice, all the things that matter to you in your spiritual life, and to listen to others and learn from one another. The people who are in it love it. I'm telling you about it because it might serve some of you, but I'm also telling you because we need each other.

What I've been giving voice to—"O nobly born"—is true: that peace is possible in the human heart, that there are Nelson Mandelas who can walk out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island prison with such magnanimity and compassion that they change an entire nation and the imagination of the world. This is possible for us as human beings. And not just Nelson, but the people singing from balconies during the pandemic, delivering food—the smallest gestures.

You carry the medicine the world needs. But you need to get quiet. You need to find a way to make your heart a zone of peace. It's why we practice. And from that quiet place, as Yeats said, our stillness allows others to see clearly too. We join hands, we join hearts, we come together.

And I close these teachings by reading yet again what I read a month ago—John O'Donohue's poem, "For Peace":

As the fever of day calms toward twilight,
May all that is strained in us come to ease.
We pray for all who suffered violence today.
May an unexpected serenity surprise them.
For those who risk their lives each day for peace,
May their hearts glimpse providence at the heart of history itself.
That those who make riches from violence and war
Might hear in their dreams the cries of the lost.

That we might see through our fear of each other a new vision to heal our fatal attraction to aggression. That those who enjoy the privilege of peace might not forget their tormented brothers and sisters. That the wolf might lie down with the lamb, that our swords be beaten into plowshares, and no hurt or harm be done anywhere along this holy mountain.

So let your eyes close for a moment. Just sit quietly. And remember what touched you or reminded you tonight of your own goodness, your own great heart of compassion, your own capacities to bring your gifts to this world.

CHAPTER 32

Opening the Heart Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 27 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a practice of opening the heart through mindful loving awareness. The session begins with establishing a stable, comfortable posture and releasing tension throughout the body, emphasizing how the earth fully supports us and inviting the heart to soften with kindness and compassion.*
>
> *The meditation unfolds in two phases. First, practitioners develop calm and steadiness by resting attention on the natural breath—noticing sensations in the nostrils, throat, chest, or belly—while allowing other experiences to rise and fall like ocean waves. Kornfield offers the gentle image of training a puppy: returning attention to the breath with patience rather than harshness, simply saying "sit, stay" to the wandering mind.*
>
> *As the practice deepens, the meditation opens to include stronger experiences that arise. When a powerful wave of sensation, emotion, or thought captures attention, practitioners are invited to turn toward it with a bow of acknowledgment, naming it gently—"sad, sad, sad" or "excited, excited"—and feeling how it moves through body and mind before naturally passing away. Through this approach, one recognizes oneself as the field of loving awareness itself: vast, still, patient, and compassionate. The practice cultivates both samatha (calm) and the beginnings of vipassanā (insight into impermanence), offering a foundation for resting in open-hearted presence.*

Find yourself a way to sit that is stable and comfortable and at ease, and at the same time has some sense of alertness and presence. In this posture and in this place, settle yourself. If you're able and comfortable, let your eyes close gently, or at least lower your gaze. Let's begin with some meditation together.

With your eyes closed gently, take two or three long breaths to begin to release whatever's being carried that can be let go of easily. Let yourself settle here on the earth. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little bit of a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright. Let the shoulders relax. The arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the cushion or floor beneath you and how the earth can completely support you. You can let go and feel fully supported just where you are. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice with loving awareness how the body breathes itself. Just now, this breath. You might feel it in the nostrils—the swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, coolness in the nostrils. You might feel the breath as a rise and fall of chest or belly. Feel how the body breathes itself in this ocean of air that we all share together. Relax with each breath. Invite a sense of calm and ease, breathing in and breathing out.

As you feel the breath, let the other experiences of sounds and thoughts and emotions and sensations rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Let your attention, your loving awareness, return again and again just to this moment, breathing in and out with ease, inviting calm, steady.

When you notice the attention moves from the breath, very gently, when you're aware you've gone off, bring it back to the next breath kindly—like training the puppy, our image. Sit, stay. Over and over until the puppy settles down, and the attention too will settle down. Sit, stay. You don't need to hit the puppy or get angry. Very kindly say, sit, this breath, and invite presence.

You're not trying to become a good breather. Let the breath be short or long, whatever it wants to do. The attention to the breath, this mindful loving awareness of this breath and this one and this one, helps you to be here now, to find ease and presence just where you are.

This breath. Ease. Calm. Resting in the present as the body breathes itself.

As you continue to sense the breath with a mindful loving awareness, let the waves of experience—sounds and sensations, thoughts, feelings—rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Periodically, one of the waves will get quite strong and pull your attention away from the breath.

Now, opening up the meditation: when a strong wave arises, let go of the breath as the focus of attention and turn toward it, as if to bow. You can name it. Itching. Tingling. Sadness. Joy. Happiness. Fear. Longing. You can name it thinking or planning, remembering. As you name the wave, let yourself sense it move through the body and mind, naming it gently—sad, sad, sad, or excited, excited. After a while, the wave will diminish, arising and passing, appearing out of emptiness and vanishing. Then return back for a time to the breath, steady and calm, this breath, until another strong wave arises.

In this way, you become the field of loving awareness. You are the awareness—noticing the breath, steadying the attention with it, and acknowledging the waves of experience.

when they're strong, just as you notice the breath coming for a time and going.

Keep it simple. This breath. Calm and steady. Or this experience, acknowledged with a name. Let it rise. Let it be felt. And in its time, pass away.

You are the loving awareness. The mindful loving awareness itself. Rest in it. Relax into it. Patient. Steady. With a kind and compassionate heart.

You are the mindful loving awareness, receiving it all with quiet, steady attention.

You are the mindful loving awareness, the space of kind and loving awareness that notices the movement of breath and the waves of experience. And around them all, you become still, quiet, vast. So let them come and go as they will.

And when you're ready, let your eyes open gently. Take another long, deep breath or two. And stay with the same field of loving awareness—with eyes open and heart open—this moment.

CHAPTER 33

Tending the Garden of the World, Tending the Garden of the Heart

Jack Kornfield · 55 min

> *In this richly layered talk, Jack Kornfield draws from early Buddhist texts and contemplative traditions to explore the practice of tending both our inner landscape and the world around us. Beginning with the Buddha's encounter with a Brahmin farmer, where the Buddha describes his own plowing—with mindfulness as his plow blade, compassion as his guide pole, and wise effort as his oxen—Kornfield illuminates how spiritual practice mirrors the patient work of cultivation.*
>
> *Kornfield addresses the challenges of our current times—climate change, warfare, social injustice—while offering an antidote to despair through the teaching of yoniso manasikāra (wise attention). He emphasizes Thich Nhat Hanh's instruction that consciousness contains seeds of both suffering and liberation, and that our task is to water the wholesome seeds. Through stories ranging from a dying monastery transformed by sacred respect, to Wangari Maathai's 51 million trees planted in Kenya, to a math teacher's simple act of kindness, he demonstrates how small actions create profound change.*
>
> *The talk weaves together themes of Buddha nature, the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching on non-attachment to results, and the recognition that we are both the gardener and the garden. Kornfield invites listeners to reflect on what seeds they are planting through their words and deeds, and to discover the three things the earth is calling them to do. The teaching culminates in a reading of Roger Keyes' poem channeling Hokusai, celebrating how life lives through us when we pay attention and let ourselves care.*

And tonight I'd like to talk about tending the garden of the world and the garden of the heart.

Ram Dass once told me that I tell too many stories, and tonight I'm afraid I'm going to prove him right.

The Buddhist texts begin: "Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember your birthright as a Buddha, as one who can be awakened. Remember your own Buddha nature."

Let me begin with a story.

Some years ago, not so far in the past, there was a beautiful old monastery that served as the mother or father house for a large monastic order in the Catholic Church. But it had gradually changed, losing its monks and members as interest in monasteries in the West declined. After a time, even though it had stood there for a century or two, only five old monks remained. They were sad because they could see that their order was dying out, and they didn't quite know what to do.

Now, it happened that there was a forest nearby connected to this monastery. On the other side of the forest stood a small hut where the local rabbi, an old rabbi who was also a mystic, would go for his own meditation. In some way he enjoyed, as they did, the sense that there was communion across the woods and the forest.

Feeling discouraged, one of the monks went to visit the rabbi on behalf of those five old men who remained. They sat together and talked about the decline of the monastery. The rabbi said very sympathetically, "Yes, the same thing for me. Not so many people come to the temple anymore. They seem to want something different. It's hard to know how to serve and connect them with the divine."

The monk said, "Well, Rabbi, do you have any advice for us? Can you help us?"

The rabbi closed his eyes, meditated for a time, then opened them kindly and said, "I really haven't any advice for you. But I have a vision that comes to me now—a strange vision that somehow among you is the Messiah."

The visiting monk paid his respects, departed with deep affection, and returned to the monastery. The other old monks gathered around and asked, "Did you talk to the mystic? Did you talk to the rabbi?"

"I did."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said he had no advice for us really, except he had this strange vision that somehow the Messiah was among us."

They all pondered what this could mean. In the weeks that followed, they began to think: Could this be true? Suppose he meant the abbot. Everyone knew the father abbot was a leader for a generation, a holy man. On the other hand, maybe he meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Thomas is a holy man, a man of light. Maybe he is the Messiah.

Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod. Elrod gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's side, when you look back on it, Elrod is almost always right—often very right. Maybe the rabbi meant Brother Elrod.

Philip? Surely not. He's too passive, a nobody. But then, almost mysteriously in his quiet way, some gift of him being there just when you need him magically appears.

Of course, the rabbi couldn't have meant me, thought each monk. He couldn't possibly have meant—you don't suppose he did suppose I... Oh no, not me. I couldn't be that much for God, could I?

As they all contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest grove, people used to come and picnic and wander there before they saw it as a decaying place. But now, as they came, without even consciously being aware of it, they began to sense the aura of extreme respect that pervaded the atmosphere as each of the monks treated one another in this sacred fashion. There was something strangely attractive, compelling about it, and hardly knowing why, they came back to play, to listen, to be there in that beautiful forest, and to bring their friends.

And so it happened that some of the younger men especially became inspired, and one asked if he could join them, and then another and another. Pretty soon it became a thriving order again—from the gift of the rabbi.

What a way to treat each other: as if that next person beside you might be the Messiah. Or maybe even, as Miss Piggy would say, *moi*.

Now, it's not easy, the time we're in.

The climate change that brings so much worry and concern for the planet in all sorts of ways. The warfare, not just in Ukraine, but in Myanmar and Libya and so many places. The scourge of racism that continues around the world, calling for social and economic justice. What to do? Perhaps the story of the monks and the rabbi can help us.

You know *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. His instructions were: First thing in the morning, you look after yourself. You brush your teeth and wash your face, don't you? Well, the second thing you must do is look after your planet.

So here are the Buddhist instructions of how to practice, from one of the very earliest texts. Early one morning on his alms rounds, the Buddha approached the area where a wealthy Brahmin landowner was distributing food to his workers. The Brahmin saw the Buddha coming with his alms bowl and said, "Oh renunciate, oh monk, I

plow and sow, I work, and having plowed and sown, then I eat. You too should do likewise. You should plow and sow, and having done so, then you might eat." A little bit of a challenge here.

And the Buddha replied, "Oh Brahman, I do plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat."

The Brahman said, "You claim to be a plowman, but I see no plow. Tell me what kind of plowing it is you do."

And the Buddha stood quietly and said, from a place of deep steadiness and connection to the earth: "Trust is the seed and composure the rain. Clarity is my plow and yoke, compassion is my guide pole, and my mind is the harness. Mindfulness is my plow blade and goad, well-directed in action and speech. I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen drawing the plow steadily toward freedom without regret. This is how I plow, and it bears the fruit of deathlessness. Whoever plows in this way will become free in the midst of all things."

And then the plowman said, "Let me offer you something," and poured into the Buddha's bowl some liquid food for the Blessed One to eat. But when the food entered the bowl—this liquid milk rice or whatever it was—it hissed and a great steam came up, as the story is told, for the bowl couldn't hold it. And the Brahmin looked and said, "I see you are a plowman indeed."

Of course, for any of you who happen to know about plowing, one of the things that happens to a plow blade when you go down the furrow in a field is that it becomes hot—in fact, almost red hot from cutting open the earth. And so this was the beautiful symbol of the Buddha's bowl being like the plow blade, hot in his hands, receiving that gift from the Brahman.

So here we are at this time on earth. What kind of seeds are we planting and tending? There are unhealthy seeds of greed, ignorance, fear, hatred, and delusion. When we plant these seeds or allow them to grow, they bring enormous suffering. We're putting trillions of dollars of our economy into killing machines. As Dwight Eisenhower said, the military industrial complex is stealing the education of our children and the wealth of our nation—the vision of what's possible for this earth. These are one kind of seed, creating new enemies and fear.

But there are other seeds. Seeds of generosity, of clarity, of gratitude, of compassion and mutual respect. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, consciousness has all these seeds embedded in it. Which ones will you water? For those are the ones that will grow.

Take a moment to reflect. The seeds of social and emotional learning for children in kindergarten or preschool, when they start to hit each other with blocks—you pause and say, "Use your words." I only wish our political leaders could do that, whether it's Putin, Zelensky, whoever it happens to be, the generals in Myanmar. Use your words. Can we educate our children to plant beautiful seeds of respect and care for one another?

Reflect in yourself. What are the seeds you plant with your words, with your deeds? What are the seeds that you water day by day, moment by moment? This is called *yoniso manasikāra*—wise attention to notice which seeds we plant and which ones we water.

Now, for many people, it's a time that feels overwhelming, and we can fall into despair, into grief. The opioid crisis, the divisive politics—we can drop into anxiety or worry or apathy, where we feel like the problems are too big and we're too small. I love the statement by the great anthropologist and explorer Wade Davis, who says, "Despair is an insult to the imagination."

Think of this: despair is an insult to the imagination. To despair, to be apathetic, to give up because it's too big, you're too small, too much, too hard—it says the imagination is not as grand and magnificent and big as it truly is. And yet we are survivors for generations, for so long. We have an enormous imagination to make things different.

Here's a story for you. "Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a snow finch asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the snow finch said. "I sat on a branch of a fir tree close to its trunk. When it began to snow—not heavily, not in a giant blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence—since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes as they settled on the twigs and the needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake, 953, dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the snow finch flew away. And the dove, since the time of Noah an authority on the great changes in this world, thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself, "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in this world."

Take a moment to quiet yourself. Let your heart soften. Despair is an insult to the imagination. Every snowflake, every seed watered becomes something to change the world.

If you want to practice, take a walk and look at the buds on the trees in the springtime. Or look closely at the grass and the weeds that push themselves up through the cracks in the sidewalk. Each bud is an answer to despair or apathy. Each springing up of life is an answer. Quiet yourself. Each great windstorm, so beyond anything we can control, is an answer—this earth moving its wind, the tides coming in and going out. These answer the small sense of self. You start to sense that you're a part of something so much bigger. And when you get quiet, as the sages say, even the leaves on the trees become like pages in the holy books.

Take time in your life to go out and seek out and study one bud. One bud. One plant pushing itself up out of the earth, one flower, one blade of grass, one seedling. They speak to you, you know. They tell you about something magnificent and huge that you are a part of, as the wind does, as the tides do.

Now, I don't want to be a Pollyanna about this. We all suffer, some more than others, and the suffering is going to continue—refugees, drought from the climate, certainly pandemics, all of these kinds of things. But your ancestors and mine have lived through pandemics and epidemics. They've lived through storms and earthquakes and tidal waves. They've lived through all the vast changes of the landscape, and they survived. In your blood is this capacity of creativity. In your blood and in your cells and in your beings are your ancestors saying, "Yes, we can do this."

For climate change, I have before talked to you about the remarkable book *Drawdown* by Paul Hawken, which describes the hundred things we can do to reverse climate change, and then the new volume, *Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation*. Don't think this is not possible. This is not an insult to the imagination or a failure of imagination, but rather an invitation to see that here and now there are choices to make. There's the re-kelping of the ocean—projects that do amazing things across square miles to start kelp forests, to draw carbon out of the atmosphere, to regrow the health of the ocean. There's compelling and wonderful new research on fusion reactors, the laser kind that are smaller than the big tokamak in France, that look like in the next year or two we'll be producing positive amounts of energy that can be replicated by the thousands.

The story is not yet read, and we get to be a part of it with the seeds we plant, with the courage that we bring.

Rachel Carson puts it this way: "If I had influence with the good fairy who's supposed to preside over the birth of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child would be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout the lifetime." The sense of wonder.

There's a beautiful story that Lynn Twist tells. She went to Africa as part of a community that was working to end hunger. She traveled to Senegal in West Africa, along the edge of the Sahel, which is contiguous to the great Sahara Desert. She went because there was a calling out from a whole group of villages—dozens of them along the edge of the Sahel—which were losing their water and therefore losing their ability to grow their gardens, to tend their animals, to live at the edge of the desert. They were asking for whatever help could be brought.

So she and her team went. She tells this beautiful story of traveling over with their Jeeps and going out. It wasn't like the great white saviors arriving. They went just to listen. They said, "We are your allies, your friends. Let us listen with you." And they sat in a circle and heard about all the struggles—how it was going to be hard for everyone to survive, how the children, the young men and women, were already moving into the city, and how their culture and villages would be lost. But the way it was set up, the men spoke while the women sat outside the circle silently. That was the culture.

Then Lynn and her friend said, "We would like to meet with the women as well. We've listened to you and we feel tremendous sympathy and hear that you've tried to do everything you can, but you don't know what to do." The men were a little bit disturbed by this—you know how men are in this world—but because these people had come so far and offered their friendship, they said, "All right."

And so there was a council of the women. After Lynn and the group listened to the women, they heard a different story. They heard about dreams that told them there was an aquifer, a lake of water under the desert nearby. If only they would dig for it, they would find the water they needed to save all of their villages. The men hadn't believed them and hadn't listened, but the women begged Lynn and those who had come for an opportunity to see.

Together they went back and talked to the chief and the men in the village, because women were not supposed to do manual labor like digging. But they insisted: "May we try it?" And so the women went out to the place where they thought the water would be found according to their visions and dreams. The men brought drums and made music for the women as the women dug—deeper and deeper, day after day, for a number of days.

And then, as you know how these stories end, the sand became damp at the bottom. They dug deeper and deeper, like you do at the seashore when you're a child digging to find water at the bottom of your hole. Pretty soon the moisture came, and the water came, and the drums played on, and the women continued to sing.

Now there is a piping system that brings that water to sixteen or eighteen villages. The gardens are flourishing, the animals are growing. All because the women had a vision and imagination that said, "Yes, there's something greater than what we know. Let us look for it, let us seek for it."

We need this. We need this among ourselves. We need this in our culture. We need to tend the seeds inwardly—seeds of trust and courage and vision. And we need to tend the seeds together with one another in community outwardly.

As Thoreau said, "I do not believe that a plant will grow where there are no seeds planted, but I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

So we need a confidence in our hearts and in our lives, inwardly and outwardly, that we can plant and water and tend beautiful seeds. Like a carpenter turns wood, said the Buddha, like a fletcher straightens his arrows, like a farmer channels water to their land—so we should tend our own hearts and minds, that beautiful things will grow from them.

Take a breath.

These are daunting times, and difficult tasks lie before us. For many of us, there is a deep grief. There might be anger or rage or fear. Underneath it, a kind of grief. And the grief is there because we care so much. Let yourself feel the grief or the despair—as Joanna Macy speaks of despair and empowerment—until underneath it you can feel the care. You can feel what matters, what makes that grief arise in you. Underneath it, something really matters, and you know what it is.

Now, if you're going to garden in this world, inwardly and outwardly—when you plant the seeds, when you set a direction—it takes a certain courage and perseverance and dedication, and maybe a moral clarity, to say, "Yes, this is what matters." In spiritual life, it is absolutely that way.

And as in the plowing text where the Buddha talks about the seeds of faith and the dedication and the plow of mindfulness and the wise effort that is the oxen—if you garden, the same thing will happen. You will plant your seeds and there will arise weeds, there will arrive insects, there will be drought.

On the inner side, in meditation, you set yourself: I'm going to do loving-kindness, or loving awareness, or mindfulness practice. And what happens? Restlessness, sleepiness, doubt, confusion, fear—all those things arise, the hindrances we call them. Any meditator who's practiced even for a little while knows the hindrances. They're like Mara

coming. They're your friends. When you learn how to recognize them and acknowledge and work with them, it's an enormous relief to feel it's not personal—it's just part of the way things are.

When you're a gardener, you don't say, "Oh, insects shouldn't come," or "The garden shouldn't need watering during drought," or "The weeds shouldn't appear." You recognize this. These are the obstacles to work with.

It's the same in business. You set a direction. You make a business. And then the obstacles come. Not enough capital. A key employee quits. The market changes. Prices go up. Supply chain issues happen—you may have noticed that lately. The competition grows strong.

Or maybe in parenting. You have this sweet, beautiful little child who can also throw a magnificent tantrum just to make sure you're paying attention. You have to protect them—they're little and they put stuff in their mouth. They hit each other with blocks. You have to make sure they don't run into the street. You have to socialize them. And that's just the beginning. Then they start to ride a bicycle. But where will they ride, and will they get in trouble? Then they start to do sports, and there's the possibility of injury. Then they go through puberty and become a teen, and they have to deal with sexuality and independence and cars and alcohol and drugs. All these things—the obstacles that you need to tend.

I remember when my daughter Caroline was about six or seven months old. She wasn't yet crawling, and we were driving down the coast to do a retreat or some teaching at Esalen. She was in her car seat, and somehow she found a penny that was there on the seat or nearby. She played with it for a little bit, and then she stuck it in her mouth. Somehow my wife saw it, or maybe I saw it in the mirror, and we were terrified. We stopped the car, looked in her mouth, tried to get the penny out. It wasn't there. Well, maybe she dropped it—who knows what happened? But we were frightened.

So we called our pediatrician. "Hey, our daughter might have eaten a penny. Something terrible might happen." The pediatrician asked a few questions and said, "If she seems all right, don't worry about it."

Here we are, trying to protect this child. A couple of days passed. We'd been worried, but things seemed okay. And then, two and a half days later, in her diaper—she was still wearing diapers—one morning we opened the diaper, and in the middle was the shiniest penny you'd ever seen. It had obviously gone through the car wash inside. She has the penny still; it's taped inside her baby book.

But there we are—the obstacles. Puberty, sexuality, independence, putting things in their mouth, protecting them. That's what it means to care for something.

And in a love relationship, it's the same thing.

You fall in love, you have this beautiful connection, but then other things appear—the little shadows and the difficulties and the conflict. When I have had the privilege of performing wedding ceremonies, which I don't do anymore, one of the things I would say to couples is this: when you go into the used car lot, there's a sign in the windows of the cars that says, "As Is."

And I would have the couple look at each other and ask, "Do you accept each other as is? Can you love each other, not with the idea of how you're going to change them, but can you love each other as is—and then water the seeds of love, water with love and goodness that they might blossom in their own way?" Stay connected to the best of these seeds.

Take a moment to reflect. What is your highest intention in your love relationship? In raising children, if you have them? In doing your work? Your intention is part of the seed. Come back to it again and again and water it. What is your intention for this world? You feel it, and you carry on. As Nelson Mandela said, "Do not judge me by my successes. Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up."

There's a famous biologist, the father of biodynamic gardening at the University of California, Santa Cruz, named Alan Chadwick. He gardened in an unusual way. He wasn't growing plants—he said he was growing soil. He was growing the connection between the soil and the seeds and the phases of the moon and the direction of the wind and the cosmic magic and the way the doves cooed in the trees and the mist from the ocean near Santa Cruz and everything you could imagine. When things were bleak, he would say, "The seeds underneath are waiting to erupt in beauty. They're pushing up saying, 'Come on, life, life!'"

To show that this was possible, he took his students to a plot of land that had been a junkyard. It was full of rusted cars and trash of all different kinds. He asked the owner if they could use it as a sample garden plot, and the man said, "You can, but the soil is dead." Of course, Alan Chadwick and his students came and amended the soil and watered it and brought things in and tended it and turned it over. After a time, it became a remarkable garden, filled with the most beautiful flowers and plants. It's still there. It was a demonstration that if you plant good seeds and tend them, even in places that seem impossible, something gorgeous and beautiful can grow.

Like the poet Deena Metzger says, "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

I think of Wangari Maathai, who started the Green Belt Movement in East Africa. She won the Nobel Prize, yes, but on the way there, she was thrown in prison several times. She was targeted in ways that might have killed her. She became a world-renowned activist, but she overcame incredible obstacles. By the time she received her Nobel Prize, she and the followers who had worked with her over decades had planted fifty-one million trees in Kenya to build the beginning of the Green Belt in East Africa.

This is the gift of gardening. You just keep doing it. Even if they throw you in prison, as they did, or disparage you, or throw up their hands, or say it's too small, you can't make a difference—remember what Thoreau said: "If you have a good seed there, I'm prepared to expect miracles."

For here's the secret, and the secret is in the Bhagavad Gita. I know you've listened this evening, so it's time to tell the secret. The secret is to act beautifully without attachment to the fruits of your actions. As Thomas Merton said to an activist who was discouraged, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not perhaps bring about its opposite. As you understand this, concentrate not on the results but instead on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself—and let the seeds grow as they will."

"I don't know whether nice people tend to grow roses, or growing roses makes people nice." —Roland Brown

So a story I haven't told for a long time concerns a math teacher in Ohio. I don't even remember her name now, but I'll call her Mrs. Matthews. She was a high school math teacher, and in her classes there were certain times when things would get rowdy or the students would fall asleep or get bored. She tried to make her math relevant and useful to them.

And there were some students who had resistance or whatever, but she loved them anyway.

One of her favorite students was a young man—we'll call him Billy. She tended him, and they made a really great connection, even though he had difficulty in math. And one day before the holiday, maybe before spring break or something like that, the class

was getting antsy and tired, and nobody was really focused. She stopped the class and said, "We can't do any more today. And I know you're going to go away for a break for a little bit. So here's what I'd like to do."

She wrote on the blackboard a list of the twenty-nine names of students in the class. She asked everyone to copy the list down, name by name, on a piece of paper. And then she said, "Your assignment for the rest of the hour will be to write next to each of these names one thing that you see that you admire or like about that person."

At the end of the class, she collected those papers.

Sometime later in the spring, when the class again got antsy—maybe it was before exam time, getting frustrated—she paused the class again. And she handed each student a piece of paper with their name at the top, and pasted on it were the twenty-nine things that their fellow students had said they admired or liked or saw as good in them.

A few years later, she got a phone call from Billy's mother, who had known that Mrs. Matthews had a deep connection with Billy. His mother called and said, "I have tragic news to tell you. Billy was killed. He went into the army, and he was killed in combat in the Middle East. We're going to have a memorial service. Would you like to come?"

She said, "Of course I will come." She loved her students.

So there they were, gathered around the gravesite—a number of her other former students and friends of Billy. People spoke about him. And then his mother spoke. She said, "You know, my son carried only a few things in his pocket when they got his body after he was killed. And one of them was this."

She pulled out a piece of paper that had been folded and unfolded clearly a number of times. At the top was written his name, Billy, and pasted on it were the twenty-nine things that students around him had seen as good and beautiful in him.

She said, "You let him see who he really was."

And of course, everybody in the circle—the other students—said, "Oh yeah, I carry mine in my wallet still," or "I posted it on the wall in my house. We all have it. It meant so much to us."

We can plant beautiful seeds wherever we are. We can tend them and water them and make the earth different. Because who we are is earth tending herself. We are life. We're not separate from it.

Oh nobly born, you are consciousness. This is what you are. You are the gardener. You are also the garden. You are all of it. You can't separate yourself from the Amazon and the atmosphere and all those ancestors who've been here before you and buried underneath your feet—cheering you on, by the way. You are all of this.

And in fact, you are the vastness. When you get quiet and deep, you realize, as Nisargadatta said, "Wisdom says I am nothing, and love says I am everything. And between these two, my life flows."

Or as Thich Nhat Hanh said, "I was never born. I never died. I'm like the raindrop. I'm the cloud that then turns into snow and rain and enters the river and the ocean and then becomes a cloud again. I was never born. I never died. I am this life living through this body at this time."

This is who you really are. And when you get quiet and listen deeply, you know this. This is your true nature.

But of course, there's that little dilemma.

Okay, Buddha nature, true nature, the divine, the oneness. You need to remember your Buddha nature *and* your zip code. You have to remember both the vastness and the uniqueness of your own life and seed, and both of them come together.

This is your time. This is the time that Earth is calling you to plant beautiful seeds, to tend them, to make beautiful things grow. Whether you see them in this lifetime or not, it does not matter, because all of us doing it together is what makes it work.

So again, get quiet. Let yourself reflect. You are the garden and the gardener. You are all of it. Come into your form now, this amazing mystery. Maybe even close your eyes. What three things is the earth calling you to do to make a real difference? You can know. And with all the divisiveness and conflict in our society, in the world, in the human world, what three things are you called to do to make a real difference? This is what the Sufis call *sobet*, a conversation with the heart.

I end with a poem, along with your beautiful reflection, your shining faces, your good hearts, the fact that you are in fact magnificent gardeners. This is by Roger Keyes, who is a steward of and an expert in the woodcut art of Hokusai, the great Japanese printmaker—the one whose Japanese prints you see of Mount Fuji and the boats and the waves, all those gorgeous prints. Hokusai, the great artist. Roger Keyes speaks with Hokusai's voice, the artist who looked at the world so deeply and brought it to us so we could see it:

Hokusai says, look carefully. Pay attention. Notice. Stay curious. There is no end to seeing.

Hokusai says, look forward to getting old. Keep changing. You just get more of what you really are. Repeat yourself as long as it is interesting. Keep doing what you love. Keep meditating and praying.

Every one of us is a child. Every one of us is an angel. Every one of us has a body. Every one of us is frightened. Every one of us has to find a way to live with fear.

Everything is alive. Shells, buildings, people, fishes, mountains, trees. Water is alive. Everything has its own life. Everything lives inside us. Everything lives with the world inside you.

It matters that you care. It matters that you feel. It matters that you notice. It matters that your life lives through you. Contentment is life living through you. Joy is life living through you. Satisfaction is life living through you. Peace is living through you.

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Look, feel. Let life take you by the hand. Let life live through you beautifully.

So let's sit for a minute or two. Getting quiet, listening with the heart allows you to be the gardener and the garden, to plant and water beautiful seeds. And what else matters as you pass through this incarnation, this life?

To make blessings.

I don't know whether nice people tend to grow roses, or whether growing roses makes people nice. However you want to look at it, you can do beautiful things.

So thank you for your kind attention.

And when you reflected on what you were being called to do—you know, you actually do know.

Thank you, dear ones. See you again.

CHAPTER 34

The Most Basic Truths: Gateways to Freedom

Jack Kornfield · 53 min

> *In this deeply grounding talk, Jack Kornfield returns to the foundational teachings of Buddhism after months of addressing collective challenges like war and pandemic. He explores the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhaṇa)—impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā)—not as abstract philosophy but as practical gateways to freedom and peace.*
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> *Kornfield illuminates how truly understanding anicca opens us to trust rather than fear, recognizing that change makes room for renewal. He describes the three types of dukkha: the suffering of change, physical and mental pain, and the inherent unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence (saṅkhāra dukkha). Rather than avoiding this truth, he shows how opening to suffering awakens the great heart of compassion—connecting us to one another in what he calls "the communion of the open heart of life."*
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> *The teaching culminates with anattā, the recognition that we are not separate selves but part of the vast web of existence. Drawing on teachers from Nisargadatta Mahārāja to Ram Dass, Kornfield invites us to discover the loving awareness that witnesses all experience without clinging. Through poetry, stories, and guided reflection, he demonstrates how these ancient insights transform our relationship with anxiety, grief, and the challenges of our time—offering not escape but the freedom available when we see clearly and rest in our true nature.*

So what I'd like to talk about tonight—and we'll see how it goes—is the most basic truths in Buddhist teaching. I've come to it in part because in these last months I've been talking about the war in Ukraine and the pandemic and the collective anxiety and all these other things. And it feels like it's time to come back to the basics.

I'll start with a poem that answers a kind of question for us as human beings, as human incarnations. What kind of world did we incarnate into? So this is a poem from Brigid Lowry that I often read. It is, by the way, a meditation poem:

In the strange early morning half-light we sit. In the cloudiness of our questioning we sit. In our madness and our clarity we sit. In the midst of too much to do we sit. In the warm arms of our shared sorrow we sit. In community and in loneliness we sit. In sweet exhaustion we sit. In the blazing energy of being alive we sit. Here with the singing of the coyotes and the crickets. Here with each electric bird song. Here with the rippling of

breezes and the great trees and the dry grasses. Here with the cobwebs and the clouds and the teeming masses. And the dusty road upon us, us in the sound and the sound in us. Us in the world and the world in us.

So here we are with this human incarnation, given a human life. And of course, at this time—maybe in all times, but right now—there are things that are quite difficult. Especially if you're here where I am in North America, there's the growing fire season. And then we look at the images in the news and there's floods and refugees and climate change. And of course the wars: Ukraine and Myanmar and Libya and so many other places. So there's all those kind of difficult images and troubles of this human realm that we're born into.

And then last night there was the eclipse, the blood red moon. Really kind of magic to watch the eclipse, because you could see the shadow of our sphere moving across the face of the moon. And at least in North America, there's spring and blossoms. It's the plowing season in some places. Maybe that would be at the beginning of the rainy season for others. There is in California this year a renewed migration of monarch butterflies—not so many had been seen for a long time. So there's the troubles and there's the springtime and the music of the spheres.

When I was first taught in the monasteries in Thailand and Burma, the key to the basic nature of life was repeated over and over again. Everything is anicca, or impermanent. Look at it. Everything is dukkha, which means unsatisfactory. And everything is anatta. Anicca, dukkha, and anatta. And anatta means emptiness, selflessness. We'll talk about all of them. The reason that these were repeated over and over is they were saying: if you see these, you see with the eyes of wisdom.

Zen Master Seung Sahn Soen Sa Nim, the Korean Zen master with whom I studied, said: "Once a great man sat under the Bodhi tree, saw the morning star and gained enlightenment. He saw the sky was blue, the earth was brown, and all things were rising and passing. Things were just as they are." And then he really knew the nature of things and his enlightenment was complete. He saw things the way they are: arising and passing, blue sky, brown earth.

Or Krishnamurti, the great sage, said: "It is the truth that liberates and not your efforts to be free." It's seeing the way things are. And of course, to survive—because we have this very complex human brain—the brain, besides seeing the way things are here in the present, also tries to anticipate, keep you safe, fix and stabilize and imagine.

So the first of these basic truths is anicca, impermanence. And you say, well, what's the big deal? Of course things change. Why is this news? The stock market's gone down and it will go up sometime. It's just what things do.

The phases of the moon change. But there's something deeper to feel and know. The point of it is seeing with the eyes of wisdom—it brings a kind of liberation.

Here's a phrase from the texts: karma changes, or karma can change, like the swish of a horse's tail. That is, at one time everything seems hunky dory and fine and going along. And then in a moment—an accident, or a diagnosis, or an opportunity, or an asteroid, or who knows what, a pandemic—and everything gets turned topsy-turvy. Karma can change like the swish of a horse's tail, and then all of a sudden you go, "Oh yeah, whoops, anicca." Things are not as stable as we thought. Not so solid.

And we're watching the contests of empires—the Russian empire trying to get back, the Chinese empire trying to get big the way it was a thousand years ago, and the US empire. What did Chief Seattle say? Tribe follows tribe and nation follows nation. Even empires come and go. And wars arise for a time and then they end. There's always an end to a war, however horrific and terrible and sad it is—then it ends. Then of course there might be a new war and a new conflict. This is anicca. It's where we live, where you live, where I live.

Now in psychology 101, there's an experiment that's often done in which three buckets of water are placed at the front of the room. One bucket has hot water, quite hot. One bucket has room temperature. And one bucket has ice water with ice cubes in it. The unsuspecting student who volunteers to come up for the psychological experiment is invited to take two hands and place one in the bucket of ice water and one in the bucket of quite hot water and see how long they can stand it—usually thirty seconds or a minute or whatever. It's not that easy.

Then the next instruction, when they take their hands out, is to put them in the bucket of room temperature water and let them touch each other. And in that moment, there's this funny expression that comes over the face of the psychology student, because to one hand the water feels really cold—the hand that was in the hot water—and to the other hand, touching it, the water feels really hot—the hand that had been in the ice water. Their perceptions are warped somehow. Which perception can I trust?

You know, my dear friends—and I have to include myself in this—we get pretty attached to our perceptions of things, and yet they're not really quite certain, are they? The Buddha said at one point, "People who cling to views"—the wise ones, he said, don't

cling to views—"but people who cling to views go about the world annoying others." That's one of the passages that I think is a little bit of humor from the Buddha—or maybe he was just experiencing that.

So what changes our perceptions? You're a libertarian or a Republican or a Democrat or a whatever for a certain portion of your life, and then it might change. Your views change. What else changes?

It's said in the Buddhist texts that who we are are the five skandhas, sometimes translated as the five aggregates, or the five rivers—which is how I like to translate it. A river of physical experience and sensations of the body, a river of feelings, a river of perceptions and views, a river of thoughts and images, and the river of consciousness. And they're always changing. You could see it when you sat in meditation. Nothing stayed the same for a moment as you paid attention.

Now here's why anicca is important to understand. Because everything is changing, the more you cling and hold on, the more you suffer. Holding on is called rope burn. You try to hold on to things and they're changing—whether it's the views or the world or the empires or your emotions.

I remember the story of a couple, two men who got married, and part of their celebration in their life was to take a road trip to Montreal, to the biggest bonsai tree garden in North America. Amazing bonsais imported from Japan and China and grown there. So they got in a car and they drove a long way up into Canada from where they lived in New England. And they got there—one of the guys had arranged the trip and was really happy because he loved bonsai, they both did—and they arrived at the gates of this huge garden and it was padlocked shut. And this was before the pandemic. "Sorry, we're closed on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. We're open these days of the week."

And his partner looked at him and said, "Didn't you check on this?" And got all upset and frustrated. "We drove all the way here!" And the guy who'd done the driving and

brought them there, just got quiet and said, "Let's see, let's take a little walk here. Maybe we can figure something out."

And what's he going to figure out? He's going to call somebody? Is there a way to get in? Can they open it? He just started walking along the huge—this is a giant botanical garden—along the gate and along the front wall, a high wall. You could see the beautiful fruit trees and amazing trees inside. He walked and walked, just trying to get quiet, figure out, well, what should we do next? He went around the corner at the end of that long front part of the garden and started to walk further.

And then all of a sudden, to his and their surprise, the wall stopped. It was a facade on the roadside of the garden. But as they walked along the side, there was no wall. And they could walk right in, which they did, whatever day it was, closed or not. One of them smiled and the other sort of apologized—you know how it is being a couple.

But the idea was that instead of saying things are or aren't possible, instead of getting so frustrated, to be open and say, "Oh, I wonder what's going to happen next"—to have that spirit.

Because the truth is that the body produces one hundred billion new red blood cells every day. That's fifty thousand in the time that I read these few sentences—your body's making that. There are a trillion living creatures in your gut and in parts of your body, little ones that live in your eyelashes and your eyebrows and so forth, all having their little bacteria, virus, buggy little life, being born and dying. You are this walking—my friend Wes calls it a walking feedlot for this entire cornucopia of life. You lose six hundred thousand particles of skin an hour and it's replaced in that hour. You get a new stomach lining regrown every five days, and all the major parts of your liver are recreated every six weeks. Your eyebrows take four months. But who you are is this river of change that's constantly changing and opening and evolving. And as we become wise, we step back and see the mystery of it instead of how it's supposed to be.

I had a friend who was the hospice director of a very big hospice for some years. One day he went in—he'd been working with a lot of the patients who were dying. There was an old Italian man there whose family kept coming in to attend to him, his children and so forth. They came in one morning and said, "We need to talk to the hospice director." They said, "We have a problem, a question. Our father is here"—it was three of the children—"and he's very close to dying. But his younger brother was killed yesterday in a car accident. We don't know whether we should tell him because he's so close to dying himself. Maybe it will agitate him and make him feel terrible. Maybe we should just leave him and let him be in that state of loving his brother and not knowing about the loss. What should we do?"

My friend, the hospice director, said, "Well, let's go in and see your father and see how he's doing. Maybe we'll understand better when we do that." Here's this kind of open-minded response—not exactly this is right or that's wrong.

They went in and sat with the father, who was pretty weak but still conscious and could speak. They said, "We're so glad to see you, Dad. How are you?" He said, "Well, I'm getting weaker and my time is coming." Then he looked at them and said, "Don't you

have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "About my brother. Don't you know he died?" They said, "Well, how do you know that?" And he said, "Oh, I've been talking to him all morning."

There's a little bit of a mystery for you. I could tell you fifty more stories like this. Who are we, born into this body, this human incarnation? Who do you think you are?

Things change. I remember a retreat that was taught by Michelle McDonald. She was teaching on the East Coast at our center in Barre, and she also worked in the family program.

So she liked to work with little kids. And she brought this group of little kids—I think they were like kindergartners or something—and said, "Let's talk about things being born and things dying." And kids are interested in that. So they talked about it some, and then she said, "I'll tell you what, let's learn more about it. You go out in the woods"—which was around where we are—"and bring back whatever you find that's died, and we'll look at it together."

And the kids ran out excitedly and they brought some dead leaves or some sticks. And one kid found a little bit of a skeleton of some mouse that had died. And somebody else found a bone, or they found something else that had died. And they brought them all back together, made a pile, and said, "Wow, all these things in the forest have died."

And then she said, "Well, what do you think about this?" Trying to understand how it looked to these five-year-olds. And one of the kids said, "Well, it looks like everything in the forest is there for a while and it dies." And another little kid piped up and said, "Yeah, it's a good thing. Because if the trees and the branches and things didn't die, then there'd be more and more and more of them. They'd get so close together and then there'd be no room for us."

They knew somehow that change actually is the opportunity for something new to come. And that death isn't something wrong. It's natural. As Emily Dickinson said, "Because I did not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me." It's just part of an incarnation. So you might as well relax and become the loving awareness, become the sky of awareness and see how things are changing.

But then there arises all our anxiety—the emotions of being anxious and worry, the stories we tell ourselves, the body. What about COVID? What about the stock market? What about whatever it is that worries you? What about family? All these things. And the mind kicks in, trying to protect you from change.

The practice is not to resist the anxiety and the thoughts, not to judge them, but to bow and say, "Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay just now." And not let the voices of anxiety take over the heart. You can name them. "Oh, here's worry. Here's anxiety. Thank you." And then ground yourself and become part of the earth, or feel the openness of the sky through which the birds and the clouds and everything come and go, or the trees of the forest renewing itself.

And people will call me—friends, people I've taught over the years and worked with—"I'm going into surgery." "My teenage son is dealing with addiction, he's in trouble." And we talk about the specifics: what you can do, how do you resource yourself, how do you support yourself? And then often I'll say, "Make an altar. Put a little altar with a picture of your teenage son on it and surround that picture with Quan Yin or Buddha or whoever you value. Let yourself reflect on who carries the spirit that most matters to you in this world, whether they're alive now or whether they're an archetypal being—the Buddha or Mother Mary. And make a bow, maybe light a candle, and say to Mother Mary and Kuan Yin and the Buddha and so forth, 'Will you please hold my boy? Will you hold him so that I don't have to worry quite so much?'"

I am traveling at great speed toward a star in the Milky Way. My heart's a little fast. Otherwise, everything's okay. The voice of a poet.

With anicca, we step back and say, the galaxy is turning, things change. And we learn the trusting heart. The practice of sitting in meditation is to learn the trusting heart. "Oh, nobly born," it says, "remember your true nature." Become the loving awareness—the shift of identity from that small worried person to the Buddha that you are.

And I see it in my cohort. I'm about to turn seventy-seven. I know a lot of dead people, lots of friends who are sick, many people in my address book—I used to have an address book.

Now it's electronic. Half of them aren't here in this incarnation anymore. It's happening. They're moving off stage. We're in the queue, so to speak.

And then there are all these new grandchildren, you know, and what follows. Just reflect for a moment, because life is renewing itself through you, around you—you're a part of it. You are life renewing itself. Even as you age and die, you're in the recycle process.

Here's a reflection. Quiet yourself. Maybe even let your eyes close. What is changing in your life? What are the big things that are changing? And what would the wisest part of you say in response to this change? What would the wisest part say? Here's how to hold this. You can know. You already do. It makes us come more alive, more trusting—this impermanence.

I think of my old friend and colleague, Stephen Levine. We taught retreats together, taught and practiced together. I remember he would ask people—he was teaching death and dying retreats—he would say, "If you only had a short time to live, who would you call? What would you say? And why are you waiting?"

This is the wisdom of impermanence, of trust and living fully just where we are.

Then anicca goes to dukkha. And dukkha is this complicated term. It has a lot of meanings, but mostly it means things are insecure and uncertain. It's also translated as suffering. And if we look with the eyes of wisdom—well, all we have to do is turn on the news. The conflict, domestic terrorism in Buffalo, and the continuing scourge of racism, as if some people are better than other people. It's kind of crazy that here's a little child born, and what particular color they are—whether they're green or brown or black or white or yellow—what color you are determines your value. It's kind of insane. But the suffering from it is enormous. This is dukkha. Just like the wars are dukkha. These are the big ones in the news—the pandemic, the climate change. This is your human incarnation, folks. Mine too.

So the Buddha, under the Bodhi tree, when he attained enlightenment at the time of the morning star, like that poem said, he sat quietly for a time, as the story is told. And then he turned his eye, his wisdom eye, toward the world of living beings across the whole world. And he saw beings everywhere wanting to be happy, yet often doing the very thing that made them unhappy. And the tears of the great heart of compassion rolled down his cheeks. It's said in one of the myths or stories that those tears turned into Tara, the goddess of infinite compassion. She was born out of those tears. He saw the sufferings of the world, and immediately that great heart of compassion that was also the Buddha nature began to shine in every direction.

To understand dukkha, there are three kinds of dukkha. There's anicca dukkha—the dukkha of change. Joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. However wonderful, you know, that incredible meal, that great vacation, that sexual ecstatic experience—I hope you had one at some time—and that delicious spiritual awakening and so forth. There's that little voice inside that says, "God, I wish this would last." But it doesn't. The dukkha of change.

Now, the good thing is that when things are terrible, they don't last either. But this is one kind of dukkha—that nothing lasts. And seeing it with eyes of wisdom, the heart goes, "Okay, I have to really get this. You can't hold on."

The second kind of dukkha is the dukkha of pain—physical and mental pain. Part of what we learn in meditation is to sit when your knee hurts and your back hurts, when you're having physical pain. We live in a culture that basically wants to sell you a prescription, a painkiller, the moment you're a little uncomfortable. We live in a culture that fears discomfort. You have to do anything to stay comfortable. Good luck. It doesn't work that way.

But when you take your seat with some dignity and allow the itches and the pleasures and the pains, the tightness and the release and the opening, when you allow all the energies that are stuck in the body, there becomes this opening of trust, of loving awareness, and a deepening capacity—expanding the window of tolerance to hold it all in compassion.

And it's physical pain, yours. Sometimes it's harder when it's the physical pain of someone near you. If you haven't learned to sit with it, you can't hold somebody else's hand when they're in the hospital or at an accident or dying, because you don't know how to be with it. You don't know how to rest in loving awareness and say, "Yes, this too."

My friend Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General of the United States, said that more than half of what comes into the hospitals and clinics across America is really based on emotional pain and suffering. It's not even the physical suffering. So this is the second kind of dukkha, physical and mental pain. You all know it because it's part of incarnation. We have it.

And then the third kind, which is called sankhara dukkha. Sankhara means all the different things that arise and make up the whole world, the form of the world of duality. Sankhara dukkha is just the nature of things. To have a globe and a world and a moon and a solar system and galaxies, there's light and dark. There's birth and death. There is unbearable beauty, amazing beauty, and an ocean of tears.

The Buddha said at one point that you've been born and died so many times that the bones of even one person's incarnations piled up would be as high as the great Mount Vipula, taller than Everest. That's how many times you've taken incarnation. Now, it may or may not be true, but what it was pointing to is that built into this human life is this birth and death—born and dying and born and dying. Each day, each moment, it's what we are.

And then the text goes on: Did you never see a man or a woman aged, bent down with blotched limbs, walking with a cane? Or sick and lying in bed? Did you never see a corpse after their life energy has passed from the body? And did the thought never happen to come to you: "Oh, this will happen to me too"?

But we live in a culture that says get more money, more power, more things. Consume. Travel. Get these things—all of which are fine; I like some of them too. But the message is: if you do it right, there won't be dukkha.

I'm sorry. I am really sorry. It's not how it works. And I know people who have very little who are insanely joyful and happy, and people who literally have billions of dollars and anything you could buy who really struggle with sorrow and unhappiness.

I could just ask: How many of you have dukkha? Raise your hand. But you don't have to bother, because we know.

Just as impermanence gives birth to trust when you really see it deeply—you realize that just as things are dying, as the kids saw in that forest, it makes room for something new to be born, and you begin to trust the process of turning—even as you sit and the emotions come and you make space. There's sadness and fear and you allow it, and it rises in a big way. And then if you stay with it, it passes. And there you are, still the loving witness of it all.

So just as anicca, impermanence, is the doorway to trust, dukkha gives birth to compassion. They come together. They make a courageous heart.

Thich Nhat Hanh was asked not so long ago about climate change, before he died. A student asked him, "Should I sit and meditate and go on retreat and somehow purify my heart? Will that help? Will that make the difference? Is that what I should do? I'm worried about climate change. Or should I go out on the barricades? Should I protest? Should I get politically involved? What should I do?"

And Thich Nhat Hanh got quiet, looked back, and said, "Just listen until you can hear the sounds of the earth crying."

He didn't tell the student what to do. He just said: Let yourself open and hear and feel and listen and sense the truth.

Your grief becomes a doorway. As Rilke says, if the drink is bitter, then turn yourself into wine. So you sit and you quiet the mind and open the heart, and you listen until you can hear the sounds of the earth crying.

There's a story of an old Hasidic rabbi who used to talk about the practice of prayer and meditation. He always used a strange phrase. He would say, "When you meditate, when you pray, when you offer these prayers, recite them, feel them, and place them on your heart." One day a student said, "Rabbi, Rabbi, why do you always use that strange phrase, 'place them on your heart'? Shouldn't we put them *in* our heart?" The rabbi got quiet and said, "It's not us who can put them in the heart." Perhaps he said it's God that puts them in the heart, or the divine, or something deeper than our own will. He said, "Our practice is to recite them and place them on the heart, so that someday when the heart breaks, they will fall in."

And this is how grief and dukkha becomes the doorway to compassion.

A poem for you called "Everyday Grace" by Stella Nasanovich:

It can happen like that—
meeting at the auto repair, buying tires
amidst the smell of rubber,
the grating sound of jackhammers and drills.
Anywhere we share stories, grace flows between us.
The tire center waiting room becomes a healing place
as one speaks of her husband's heart valve replacement,
bed sores from complications.
A man speaks of multiple surgeries,
notes his false appearance as strong and healthy.
I share my sister's death from breast cancer,
her youngest only seven.
A woman rises, gives her name, Mrs. Henry,
then takes my hand.
Suddenly, an ordinary day becomes holy ground.

This is how we connect. We hold hands. There's something so innate in us when there's suffering. You can look at Ukraine and see all the terrible things, but you also see nations and Doctors Without Borders and World Central Kitchen and people from every direction pouring in their love and help and support. That is also us. Suffering brings us the deepest compassion.

Impermanence, yes. Dukkha, part of this incarnation. It's here, baby. It is us. And yet it connects us in compassion and love. It does.

So quiet and close your eyes again for a moment. What is calling to you? What suffering, what loss, what difficulty in your life, in the world? What is calling to you and saying, "Yes, don't avert your gaze. Let your heart open, see, feel"? And then—what courage is asked of you? You can know. When compassion arises, compassion is a verb. It also says, "I must. I will. I find a way to make a difference."

Now, Thich Nhat Hanh from the Mahayana tradition of Vietnam teaches these three characteristics. He calls them the three seals. And instead of teaching dukkha, he teaches nirvana—because knowing dukkha is the gateway to nirvana, to freedom or peace.

As Zen Master Suzuki Roshi, who founded San Francisco Zen Center, said: "When you realize the fact that everything changes and find your composure in it, there you find yourself in nirvana." Nirvana isn't someplace else. It is the freedom and the peace that's available to you with a quiet mind and an open heart, when you become the loving witness of it all. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is not. And you can rest in loving awareness and joy.

We can get so loyal to our suffering and forget that joy—that joy I like to talk about from the books of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, laughing and joking together in *The Book of Joy*.

So dukkha gives birth to the great heart of compassion.

And then the last of these three is anatta, which is translated sometimes as emptiness, no self, no separate self. This is the hardest one to understand, but you could sort of feel it when we were meditating together and I said, "Now, who are you?" toward the end. Look—and you look and you don't find yourself. There are sensations and thoughts and experiences, and there is awareness, but it's not *your* awareness.

In fact, you're not even there exactly. There's just awareness itself. Nothing separate.

Wes Nisker, my colleague and friend at Spirit Rock, puts it this way. He's a humorist as well. He said, here's the three characteristics: Life's hard. It'll put you through changes. Don't take it personally.

And this is the third—anatta—that it's not yours. The profound reality, the invitation to step out of the fiction of separateness, what's called the small sense of self or the body of fear, where we get frightened or selfish or self-centered or cut off.

Alice Walker wrote, "One day when I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed, and I laugh and I cry and I run all around the house. When it happens, you just can't miss it."

And we know this—walking in the high mountains, or making love, or being there at the mystery of the birth of a child, or the death of a human being silent like a falling star. All of a sudden we step out of the time-bound consciousness, the separateness, and feel ourselves part of the turning of the seasons of life. You feel it on retreat. You're doing walking meditation and all of a sudden you realize you're not doing it. It's all just doing itself. It's amazing.

No self, as one of my teachers said—no self, no problem. More self, more clinging, more self-centeredness, more problem.

But it's like this. When I look at my daughter, she was born of an egg carried by her mother. But the egg that was carried by her mother was actually there in her grandmother's body. When her mother was an infant in her mother's womb, the grandmother's womb carried the egg that became my daughter. And then my daughter grows up as a woman and she has a child. Maybe she has a daughter—she has a son now. Maybe she'll have a daughter, we don't know—who becomes a mother and grandmother. And the eggs are there a couple of generations before and after. We are not ourselves. We are the whole chain of beings.

And in one apple is the mystery of life. That tree doesn't grow without the rhizomes underneath it in the forest floor, the sunlight on the leaves, the wind, the turning of seasons, the planting and the harvesting in an apple orchard, or before that in the wild apples. And the chlorophyll that turns sunlight into sugar—now, how's that for a miracle? We live on a planet where light turns into sugar so you can be happy. The biosphere, the genetics of an apple, and all of it's just happening, baby. This is selfless. This is the form of life coming out of consciousness itself and expanding and opening in all these remarkable multitudinous ways.

A man came up to the Buddha—his name was Mogarajan—and he asked him a question three times. When you ask three times, then the Buddha has to answer, as it's said. He said, "Tell me, oh Blessed One, you are supposed to be wise. How can I live so that I will not be seen by the king of death?"

And the Buddha responded, "O Mogarajan, do not cling to anything as being yours alone, as being self, or I, or mine. And if you do not cling to anything as self, you will not be seen by the king of death."

So this is the invitation Thich Nhat Hanh talked about—the seal of nirvana, of freedom. The timeless freedom that is who you really are. When you don't cling to your body, your feelings, your relationships, the things around you. And understand, when I say don't cling, I don't mean don't care. You know the difference. You'll feel it in your body between attachment and love. They're really different. And you can live in the timeless present, the consciousness of loving awareness itself.

I remember my time with Nisargadatta, this great guru in Bombay, where he said at one point, "My consciousness can enter into anything, and I can feel the experience of it, because it's all consciousness."

He said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing. Love sees that I am everything. And between these two, my life flows."

I loved watching Ram Dass in the last years of his life because he was there in that wheelchair, in a broken body where he couldn't move one arm and one leg, where he had aphasia and couldn't speak fluently, grappling to find words. He had multiple infections and physical traumas and bedsores at times and all these things. And he was about the happiest person I'd ever been with. Really joyful amidst all the paralysis and aphasia.

"How can you be so joyful, Ram Dass?"

And he said, "I am loving awareness. I love it all. I love it all. The joy, the sorrow, the birth, the death, the spring and the winter."

So when you understand, there comes this beautiful sense of freedom. This is our incarnation.

And then from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *The Little Prince*, he says, "First thing in the morning, you look after yourself. You brush your teeth and wash your face, don't you? Well, the second thing you must do is look after your planet." It's not that complicated.

And the heart changes when we come to terms with change and impermanence and realize we can trust that life wants to renew itself. And we come to terms with dukkha and say, "Yes, that's part of incarnation. You don't get out of it." Loss and change and pain and suffering and gain and pleasure—all are woven together.

I don't know whether nice people tend to grow roses or whether growing roses makes people nice. And I don't know the answer either. But I do know there's a kind of joy that comes when we see with the eyes of wisdom and the great heart of compassion and trust.

Oh, nobly born, remember this teaching for now and forever.

And as you know, when you touch this, it spills out of you—your joy, your peace, your acceptance, your flexibility, your non-rigidity, your openness, even with your own foibles, all held in the great heart of compassion. And you become like those people in the tire store waiting room. You become part of the communion of us, of the open heart of life.

And this is possible for you.

Alice Walker says, "War will stop when we no longer praise it or give it any attention at all. Peace will come wherever it is sincerely invited. Love will overflow every sanctuary given it. Truth will grow where the fertilizer that nourishes it is also truth. And trust will be its own reward."

Teach yourself peace. Pass it on.

CHAPTER 35

Here and Now Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 28 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners into a direct experience of present-moment awareness through the cultivation of what he calls "loving awareness." The practice begins with settling into the body, releasing tension through conscious breathing, and establishing a foundation of ease and trust in simply being here and now.*
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> *The meditation unfolds in stages: first anchoring attention in the natural rhythm of the breath—felt as coolness in the nostrils, movement in the chest or belly, or the whole body breathing. Kornfield emphasizes that wandering attention is natural, and that the gentle returning to breath is itself what steadies the mind. He suggests using soft whispered words like "calm" or "ease" to deepen the settling quality.*
>
> *From this stable base, the practice expands to include all arising experience. When strong waves of sensation, emotion, or thought pull attention away from the breath, practitioners learn to acknowledge them with gentle naming—"sadness," "planning," "hearing"—receiving each experience in loving awareness before returning to the breath. This approach reflects the essence of satipaṭṭhāna practice: clear knowing of present experience without grasping or aversion. The meditation culminates in recognizing oneself as awareness itself—the silent, unshaken witness at the center of all changing phenomena. As Kornfield reminds us, this vast loving awareness is our true home, always available, always present.*

Find a way to sit where you're comfortable and stable and at ease in your body. Let yourself be settled. If you're able, allow your eyes to close gently, or at least lower your gaze, and turn your attention just here and now to the present experience.

Start, if you will, with two or three long breaths, and allow each of the long breaths out to release whatever they will—to let yourself open, become more present. Tune into your body seated here with a loving awareness. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders drop, relaxed, and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the seat or the cushion or the floor, wherever you are. Sense how it's met equally by the earth below you, that you can let go and rest on the earth just where you are—with ease and trust in this moment, relaxed and present. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experiences here and now. There will be sensations of the body, sounds, emotions and feelings arising. A parade of images and thoughts and words will come and go. And you take your seat just where you are, in the midst of all of these rising and passing experiences.

To help settle the attention, to help quiet the mind and open the heart and the body, begin to notice how your body is breathing itself as you sit quietly. Amidst all the other waves of experience, turn your attention to feel the rhythm of the natural breath. You can feel it as coolness in the nostrils, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly, or the whole body breathing. If it's at all hard to feel, put one hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall of the belly in the palm of your hand. Leave it there.

Taking our seat halfway between heaven and earth as the Buddha that we are, begin to quiet the mind and steady the attention first by feeling this ever-changing rhythm of breath rising and passing. Let your attention be a loving awareness that kindly notices this breath as it opens and as it dissolves.

After a few breaths, very often you'll notice the attention wanders off to thinking or planning or sounds or sensations somewhere else. This is natural. As soon as you notice, notice what's there and then gently return to feel the next breath. It's the very returning and coming back that starts to steady the mind and the attention—just here, this breath. Coming back again and again, gently.

As you feel each breath, as it comes and goes naturally, the point is not to become a good breather, but to feel the breath, to use the attention to the breath to invite a calm and steady ease to arise. Breathing in and out—calm. Rising and falling—ease. Some people find it helps to even whisper these words: calm, or ease, or steady, as they sense the breath come in and out. This breath. This moment.

As you feel the breath, calm and steady, there will be all the other waves of experience—thoughts and images, sounds, sensations, and so forth. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath, and feel the breath in the middle of them all.

From the steady attention to the breath, now you can open the awareness. When one of the waves becomes strong—so strong it pulls you away from the breath, not the background waves, but a strong emotion of sadness or excitement or fear or love or longing, or a big thought train or image of the future or past, or some strong sensation like cold or itching or pain—when a strong wave pulls the attention from the breath, let go of that focus and, as if to bow to it, turn your attention and acknowledge it with a soft whisper: sadness, excitement, tingling, itching, planning, remembering.

When you name the wave of experience, let yourself be the loving awareness that notices this wave as it rises in body and mind and then passes away. Sad, sad, sad, sad—and eventually it passes. Then you can go back to the breath. A loud sound comes: hearing, hearing—and that wave of experience passes.

And you can return to feel some more breath. You become the loving witness, the loving awareness. The quiet and steady attention on the breath. And then a gracious acknowledging, naming the strong experiences that rise like waves. Name them gently, and when they pass, return to the breath.

Rest in loving awareness. You are the space of loving awareness. The openness of loving awareness. Rest in it. Just here. And notice the breath as it comes and goes. Name the strong waves of experience as they arise, received in loving awareness, and after time, pass away.

You are just here, unshaken, unmoved, the one seed in the middle of it all. This breath. This moment's experience. You are the Buddha. Seated. Silent. Loving awareness. Receiving the breath. The waves of experience. And you are the silent vastness of awareness itself. Loving awareness.

Bell

Who are you? When you look deeply, you won't find anything. There are thoughts and feelings that come and go. What there is, is this remarkable awareness, loving awareness, that knows them all. Rest in it. Relax into it. It is your home.

And when you're ready, let your eyes open gently.

You know what the bell sounds like. In fact, you know everything. This is all just a reminder. Oh yes, I do know.

CHAPTER 36

Centering Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers a practice designed to bring together the essential elements of Buddhist meditation: grounding in the body, settling the mind, and cultivating an open heart. He emphasizes that meditation is not a grim duty but rather an invitation to presence—a presence infused with what he calls "mindful, loving awareness."*
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> *The practice begins with establishing a stable, gracious posture and systematically relaxing the body from face to belly. Kornfield then guides attention to the natural rhythm of the breath, using it as an anchor to unify body and mind. He introduces the gentle noting technique for working with whatever arises—sensations like tingling or throbbing, emotions such as fear or longing, and the endless stream of planning, remembering, and imagining that characterizes the thinking mind. Rather than fighting these experiences, practitioners learn to bow to them, name them softly, and watch them dissolve like clouds in sunlight.*
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> *Central to this meditation is the recognition that we are not merely the contents of our experience but the awareness itself—the loving witness to all that arises and passes away. Kornfield invites practitioners to "sit like a Buddha," steady and kind, with an open heart in the midst of all the waves of experience. This teaching reflects core insights from the satipaṭṭhāna tradition while making them accessible through Kornfield's characteristic warmth and poetic instruction, offering a complete practice for both newcomers and experienced meditators seeking to deepen their capacity for presence and equanimity.*

Let's begin a meditation that both centers and grounds and opens you, quiets the mind and opens the heart.

Please find a way to sit that's grounded, stable, relatively upright, but also gracious and at ease. Meditation is not meant to be a grim duty, but rather an invitation to presence—to presence with whatever is here, held in a mindful, loving awareness.

Let your eyes close gently. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Perhaps roll your neck in a circle to let it find a simple upright position. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body on the seat, the chair, the floor, and how you can relax and let go. Let the earth fully support you just where you are. Trust it. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, take two or three long breaths. With each exhale, let go of what wants to be released.

In this complex and busy world, this busy time in which we live, one of the simplest and most helpful beginnings to a meditation is to come back to the rhythm of your own breath. Not to try to change it or become a good breather in some way or other, but to bring the body and mind together by feeling each breath as it comes and goes, inviting a sense of ease and calm with each breath. You might feel it in the nostrils—coolness or swirling, tingling in the back of the throat—or the rise and fall of chest or belly, or the whole body breathing. Let your attention rest in the breath, feeling its own natural rhythm, and maybe whispering softly with each breath: ease, calm.

Of course, after a few breaths—two or three or ten—the attention will wander and go off to planning, thinking, remembering, feeling other things, sounds. When you notice, bring the attention gently back to the breath. It's the very act of returning again and again that begins to steady the mind. No judgment. It's like training the puppy: sit, stay. At first the puppy doesn't listen, runs around, pees in the corner. You clean it up, just like your mind can do. And then you come back: sit, stay. Little by little, with a sense of ease and calm, in the midst of all the waves of experience, you feel the breath—this breath—and let things settle.

This breath, just as it is, receive with loving awareness. You are the mindful, loving witness as the breath arises and passes away, relaxed and calm with each breath.

As you feel each breath, let the waves of thoughts and sounds and feelings rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel the breath in the middle of them all. Steady, kind attention. Nowhere to go, just here—the reality of the present with this mysterious quality of mindful, loving awareness, present and open, steady, at ease.

Now, as you feel the breath, receiving it with mindful loving awareness, you can open up the awareness in a gracious way to the strong energies that arise and pull you from the breath. As you feel the breath move in and out, rise and fall, if there comes a strong emotion—sadness, excitement, longing, love—or if there comes a strong sensation—tingling, hot, pain, cold—as if to bow to it, you can let go of the breathing for a time and name it gently. Oh, tingling. Throbbing. Name it gently: tingling, tingling, itching, throbbing. See what happens as it rises like a wave and passes away. Then return to the breath.

Or an emotion. Fear—fear arises. Longing. Excitement. As you name the wave of emotion, let it open and move through you for a time. Excitement, excitement. When it's passed, let there be a little space, and then feel a few more breaths until some other strong emotion or sensation or sound arises.

Rest just here in the reality of the present, receiving the breath, the sensations, the sounds, the feelings with mindful loving awareness. You are the loving awareness, the loving witness to the breath that breathes itself, or to the waves of experience that arise on their own and pass away. Rest in mindful, loving awareness of this breath or this wave of sensation or feeling.

You can also notice the waves of thought. Picture thoughts and word thoughts will arise and pull the attention from the breath. It might be a story or a memory or a plan or a worry or an imagining.

And just as you note the breath coming and going, when thought comes to the center of attention, you can bow to it and name it gently. "Oh, planning, planning," or "remembering, remembering," or "worrying, worrying," or perhaps a creative thought arising.

As you name these thoughts—imagining, planning, remembering—they appear like clouds. And as you name them gently, they dissolve like clouds, because you're not in the middle of them. You are the loving awareness that acknowledges them like sunlight.

Let them dissolve. Feel three or four or five more breaths until another wave comes. You can bow to it, name it gently for a time, and then return back to the breath.

Just here. This moment. This breath. Or this wave of experience, received and acknowledged with loving awareness.

When you sit like a Buddha—steady and kind, with heart open, gracious and wise—in the midst of it all, you take your seat and let it come and go. You are the loving awareness, the loving witness, the steady one. Balanced, at ease. The witness to the joys and sorrows that arise and pass. The timeless witness.

You are the mindful loving awareness itself. Wise and steady, gracious and compassionate.

Let your eyes open gently now, keeping the sense of ease and graciousness. Whatever is quieted or settled, stay with this.

CHAPTER 37

Mindful Respect | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 54 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Jack Kornfield examines respect as a cornerstone of mindful living and spiritual practice. Drawing from his years in the Thai forest monastery with Ajahn Chah, he illustrates how mindful respect infuses every action—from folding robes to sweeping paths—with sacred attention. The talk opens with the traditional invocation "O nobly born," reminding listeners of their inherent Buddha nature and dignity.*
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> *Kornfield retells the Celtic legend of Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady, revealing its profound teaching: what all beings truly want is sovereignty—the freedom to be masters of their own lives. He connects this wisdom to the Buddha's characteristic response after teaching: "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit," demonstrating deep respect for each person's autonomy and wisdom.*
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> *The teaching extends to practical applications of loving awareness—respecting the body as "a fiesta" rather than sin or machine, honoring our feelings, training the mind, and listening deeply to others. Kornfield references Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction work, showing how respectful attention to pain and difficulty transforms suffering. He addresses contemporary challenges including divisiveness and injustice, invoking James Baldwin's insight that hatred often masks unacknowledged pain. The talk concludes with Mahāghosānanda's teaching about removing "the landmines from our hearts" and Martin Luther King's vision of soul force, offering a path of engaged compassion that honors the sovereignty and nobility of all beings.*

Tonight, the theme of the talk will be respect.

The teachings of many of the texts begin with the phrase, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are." Treat yourself with respect, honor. As Martin Luther King said, if a man or a woman sweeps streets for a living, they should sweep like Michelangelo painted, like Shakespeare wrote his plays, like Beethoven composed his music.

One of the beautiful things in the forest monastery where I lived with Ajahn Chah is that everything was done with that spirit of mindful respect—folding the robes, how you cared for your monk's bowl, the bowing before you eat, when you meet your eld-

ers, before you chant, the sweeping of the path through the forest as the trees would lose their leaves. Sweeping like Michelangelo painted. O nobly born, you who are listening, my friends, meditators, remember this sense of respect.

Now what's true, and I can't bypass it, is the recent Supreme Court decisions, especially the decision about abortion and making it illegal or allowable to be illegal in so many states that will impact especially women who are poorer, people of color. I think about how long it's been—the march for women's empowerment, when they had to fight to get the vote. They've had to fight to not be a slave, to not be raped by the person who enslaved them, to not be somebody who was just producing more babies for the man, to not be the person who is under the thumb of their husband. They had to fight to get contraception. Women have had to fight just to get equal pay, and it still hasn't happened—equal opportunity.

I think of Dolores Huerta, when she says, "Why is it the farm workers and the farm worker mothers feed the nation, but they can't get food stamps and food for their children?"

I am someone who really respects life, all phases of life from the very beginning. More than that, I respect that each woman and each person should be able to decide and live their life for themselves.

So I want to tell a story to continue with this talk tonight on respect. It's an old story that goes back to the time of King Arthur, the story of one of his great knights, Sir Gawain.

Sir Gawain and some of his fellow knights were out on an expedition across the countryside. Sir Gawain took a path that led him into a deep and dark forest. He continued to ride, to see what was there. Gradually it got darker and darker and night fell. As night was falling, Sir Gawain found himself in a clearing where there was a beautiful, almost magical well. Being thirsty, he dismounted from his horse and drank the waters of this well and began to rest.

All of a sudden, at a distance, he heard the sound of horse hooves. A horse came toward the well. It was nighttime and the moon was shining. A gorgeous white horse appeared with a woman veiled in a scarf. She took the scarf off and looked at him, and she was a fright. She was the woman who in India we call Kali, and in Russia she's called Baba Yaga. The Mayans have a word for her. She is the fierce ancient feminine—one eye on him and the other kind of drooping out and looking another direction, wild looking.

She said, "Who gave you permission to drink from my sacred well?"

He didn't know what to say.

She said, "You got no permission. You came here and took what was mine. What will you give me, knight?"

Being a knight and trying to be an honorable man, he said, "I will give you what you wish, madam. I'm sorry I have caused affront."

She paused for a while and said, "Well, knight, I've been alone a long time, and I need a husband. What I would like is to marry you."

This took poor Sir Gawain aback. He was ready to do whatever she wanted, but this seemed a little bit much. He took a deep breath and reflected and said, "Is there not anything I can do to offer you instead of this wish that I marry you?"

She said, "Yes. There's one other thing. If you can answer a question for me, then I will release you from this request."

He said, "Why certainly, what is your question?"

She looked down at him from the horse and said, "The question you must answer is: What is it that women want?"

He began to think, he began to imagine. He said, "May I have a little time to reflect on this?"—being a meditator as he was.

She said, "Yes, I will give you a year. I will lead you out of the forest, and I expect you to return in one year with an answer to this question—or else we shall have a great wedding feast."

Sir Gawain mounted his horse and agreed to her terms. She led him under the moonlight out of the forest, and he hightailed it back to the castle where he found King Arthur and some of the other knights. "Let me tell you what happened to me," he said.

They all heard his story and said, "Go to sleep, sleep on it first. We'll find out what women want."

And the next morning, the king and the knights went out across the countryside. They deputized others and they had these great leather-bound books, and they began to write down from one woman after another what it is that women want. They want children, they want love, they want land, they want money, they want music and joy. One possibility after another, and the books became filled with what women want.

Sir Gawain relaxed a little. He said, "We must have the answer somewhere in here." He lived his life, but then a year started to come up and he realized, "I have to go back. I swore as a knight that I would return, and on my honor, I will do so." So he took a stack of the bound books with all the answers and he went back on his horse into the woods.

And there in the dark forest by the well, he waited. And sure enough, after it got dark and the moon rose, he heard the hooves of the horse. And sure enough, the great white horse appeared, and the woman with the shawl unveiled herself—to be one of the ugliest women he'd ever seen, one of the least desirable of women he'd encountered. Because when you are Baba Yaga and when you are Kali and so forth, you can take any form.

And she said, "Do you have an answer, fine knight that you are?"

He handed her the books and she began to leaf through them. "No, no, no, no, no." And finally she put them down and said, "This is not the answer."

"So what now?" he asked.

"We will have a wedding. You will take me back to the palace and we'll have a wedding."

"All right, how soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"Couldn't we have it at night, please?"

"No, no, no. We have to do it honorably. I want a banquet. I want all the knights to attend. I want people to know. Let us do it in the daytime. The next day, bring them all together."

So he went back with her. They gathered a banquet and everyone came to see Sir Gawain marrying this old hag, as she was called—the Hag of Bera in Irish mythology, Kali, Baba Yaga. And once the wedding took place, everybody was talking about it, but they all respectfully watched. Then Sir Gawain and the lady he'd married retired to the bridal chamber.

She looked at him and said, "Well, it's time for us to do our wedding night lovemaking."

He was somewhat taken aback.

"You're a great knight," she said. "Are you frightened to kiss me?"

So he took all of his knightly powers and stood up and walked over to her and planted a kiss on her lips. And the moment he did, she turned into this beautiful princess, more beautiful than he could have imagined, and explained that she'd been under a spell and he had now broken the spell—in part. By his willingness to kiss her, he had broken part of the spell. He, of course, was thrilled. "Okay, I've married someone and look who it turns out to be."

"But to finish the spell," she said, "here's the dilemma. If you would like me to be beautiful like this for you at nighttime, then I will be the hag in the daytime, for you have broken only half the spell. On the other hand, if you would like to have me go around with all of your friends and all in the court in this beautiful way, I will do so, but then I must turn back into the hag at night. Which will you choose, Sir Gawain?"

He sat quietly. He did a little mindfulness meditation, reflected some metta, compassion practice. And finally he looked at her and said, "I cannot choose, really, my dear. It is up to you."

And the minute he said this—

A great smile broke across her face, and she said, "You have broken the spell. When you offered me the answer, 'It is up to you,' you granted me something that answers the question of what women want." She gazed at him and said, "What women want is their own sovereignty."

Sovereignty means to be the lady, the lord, the person who is in charge of their own life, not under someone else's rules. To be the queen of their own life, the one who decides. This is what women want—this freedom. Sovereignty is a loving respect, an awakening of respect for the Buddha nature, the secret beauty of every being.

It's interesting when I look at the Buddhist texts that mirror this story. Often people would come to the Buddha with questions and issues and problems. He would listen to them and then give teachings or advice, question them, get into dialogue, help them see in a new way. Very often at the end of those texts, when all was done, half of the time someone had some great, amazing revelation or breakthrough or enlightenment—but not always. When the dialogue was finished, the phrase that the Buddha used was: "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." He didn't say, "Follow these teachings, do what I told you"—none of that. They had their dialogue, something was illuminated, and then: "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." You can feel the level of respect, of sovereignty if you will, in this.

Every being loves respect. I think of the story of a little seven-year-old boy who went out to a restaurant with his mother. It was dinner time. They got the menus. The waiter came and said, "What would you like?" She ordered, and then she said, "Let me order for him. He would like mashed potatoes, peas, and maybe a little bit of chicken." The boy looked at the waiter and said, "What I really want is a hot dog and fries." The waiter looked back at the mother, then looked at the little boy and said, "Would you like ketchup with your fries?" Then he turned around and walked off. And the little boy turned to his mother and said, "He thinks I'm real."

We all long for respect. Our employers and employees, adults, children, elders, our garden, the fields around us, the quail and owls and rabbits—and bugs. I love this poem from Lloyd Reynolds, who was the greatest American calligrapher. He was the person who taught Steve Jobs, before Steve started Apple, the elegance of language: "A bug crawls over the paper. Leave him be. We need all the readers we can get."

I remember when the Dalai Lama had come to Spirit Rock along with Maha Ghosananda, the Gandhi of Cambodia. They were old friends, and when they saw each other, great smiles crossed their faces. They approached each other and each one began to bow, and the other bowed, and then the Dalai Lama bowed lower, and Ghosananda bowed lower, until finally they were almost horizontal and the tops of their heads touched. There was so much loving respect between them.

This is what mindfulness offers. When you sit and you name what comes—the sadness, the excitement, the fear, the longing, the sensations, the stories—and you meet them with loving awareness and a bow, you become the loving awareness that can honor things as they come and as they go.

I remember going with my teacher Ajahn Chah to visit a temple on the border of Cambodia. The forest monastery where I practiced was near the border of Laos and Cambodia, and it was a fairly long ride across the province and then through a dirt mountain road to get near the Cambodian border. As we went, the driver who had picked us up in a little Toyota started to drive really fast. He was a young guy and he liked to show his stuff. But it was a one-and-a-half-lane dirt road winding through the mountains; you couldn't see around the curves. He was speeding through it, and periodically—not very often—a big bus or a logging truck would come by. He would go fast, and we said, "Please slow down, please slow down." But he didn't listen.

It was quite a trip, speeding around those blind curves, hoping there wasn't a bus or a logging truck. I got rather frightened. Then I looked over at Ajahn Chah and saw that his knuckles were white. Somehow it reassured me—I wasn't alone in it.

We finally made it to the courtyard of this Cambodian temple, and he turned to me and said, "Scary ride, wasn't it?" It wasn't as if he was supposed to never be afraid, some kind of idealization.

It was as if he was bowing to it. You know, people go to the amusement park and get a ticket for a scary ride. It's just the way it was.

So mindful loving awareness offers a bow of respect to what arises. Respect for the body. As the poet Eduardo Galeano wrote, "The church says the body is a sin. Science says the body is a machine. The marketplace says the body is good for business. The body says, I am a fiesta."

With loving awareness—not obsessed and clinging to your body and not avoiding it and ignoring it, but with the curiosity and interest of loving awareness—you can begin to pay respectful attention to your body. Close your eyes just for a moment and ask: What in your body is wanting respect? You can know. Let your eyes open gently.

It's this loving awareness, this mindful loving awareness that can offer respect, that can listen and tune you to your own body, to the fiesta of your body.

But what if your body's in a lot of pain? I think of my dear close friend Jon Kabat-Zinn, who started mindfulness-based stress reduction decades ago in the basement of the medical school in Massachusetts. He went into the hospital—he'd done his doctorate at MIT and was a scientist, but he'd also been practicing mindfulness intensively and he knew its power. He opened a clinic in the basement and then he went upstairs for rounds or grand rounds with all the physicians and some of the nurses and said, "I'm opening a clinic in the basement for all those patients that you can't help, that you've had a struggle with because they have too much pain, too much anxiety, too much fear, and you've been unable to help them. Send them down to me." Later he said to me, "Because I knew I had the great medicine."

And people began to come down. They'd been struggling with their illness and struggling with their pain and struggling with how it was going to work out—a lot of stress and struggle. The main thing, the first thing that Jon did and the training that they had, was to take their seat and stop the war. Stop the struggle against the way things are, trying to fix it and change it and make it and all that. They'd already done all the medical things possible.

When they stopped, he said, "Let's pay a respectful attention to the pain, to the stress carried in your body, to the difficulty you're going through. Instead of trying to fight against it, what happens if you wrap it with compassion and kindness and loving atten-

tion?" And of course, much of the problem came from all the resistance and fear in the experience. When they were allowed, all those difficulties were held in a new way with care and respect.

But it's the same kind of respect for the earth itself, the body of the earth. Rachel Carson writes, "If I had influence with the good fairy who's supposed to preside over the birth of all children, I would ask her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible it would last throughout life."

Just as we can become the steward of our body, just as we can respect what's here in our body, we can also listen to what the earth is calling you and me and others to do. I think of the monks who were terribly aggrieved when the great forests around the forest monastery were being cut down and the teak trees sold—the environmental destruction. So they went out into the middle of the biggest remaining parts of the forest and took the robes and wrapped them around trees. You've heard this story. They did a whole long ceremony to make the biggest trees the abbots of the forest and created a shrine there, and the loggers wouldn't go anywhere near it because it became sacred again. This is the body of the earth that asks for your bow of attention, your care. What is it asking of you even now?

And then there's the feelings that we have. William O. Douglas, Supreme Court Justice from a previous generation, said, "At the Supreme Court level where I work, ninety percent of our decisions are made on an emotional basis. And the other ten percent is our minds used to rationalize those decisions." We can see that even now. It's really led by feelings—what people want, what they believe, what they don't want, all different kinds. And yet mostly we're unaware; we're lost in our feelings. Each one comes, each perspective. We don't know how to step back and be quiet and listen more deeply in a connected way to what will serve everyone.

But it's not just the Supreme Court. You too carry the ocean of tears, sadness, and fear. And you carry the unbearable beauty and joy and love of this world, all in you. How do you treat this? Do you treat your heart, your feelings, with respect? Do you listen deeply?

During my second month of nursing school, our professor gave us a pop quiz.

I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans this classroom, this corridor, and the rest of the school?" Surely this was some kind of joke. I'd seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired, in her fifties. But how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank.

Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. "Absolutely," said the professor. "In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello." I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned that her name was Dorothy.

What does it mean to pay attention with loving awareness and respect to one another? Take a pause. Listen inside. What in your heart wants respect? And what in the feelings of others around you wants respect?

In this difficult time, we have to learn to listen to each other. In this divisive and fraught moment in our history in the United States and elsewhere in the world, we can't afford to not offer respect to one another and to try to listen in a different way—because it's not "them." As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

There he was, writing from Siberia and the Gulags, with this great heart of wisdom—a Nobel laureate. This is us, this is human beings. We need to find a way to listen to all the parts of one another.

Then there's respect for the mind. The Buddha asks: Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than a mind trained, not even your most beloved friends, and no one can harm you more than a mind untrained.

So you begin to pay attention. And with loving awareness, you see that the mind creates everything. As the great lama Khenpo Rinpoche says, the mind creates both samsara and nirvana. Yet there's not much to it—it's just thoughts. Once you see deeply, you'll see that thoughts appear and disappear. They're empty like clouds. And the mind will have no power over you.

So you have to see the mind—the thinking mind, the planning mind, the remembering mind, the judging mind, the doubting mind—and say, "Oh yes, thank you for those thoughts. Thank you for trying to keep me safe. I'm okay." You offer respect and see anew and see clearly. Who are you? This invites a shift of identity from being lost in the thoughts.

When I was at UC Berkeley at the law school as part of a conference, there was a man who had been a judge. He was a meditation practitioner invited to sit on the bench. And he thought, "Sit on the bench? I know how to sit." He'd been meditating for many years. "I can do this." And here are the instructions he gave to his jury: "I want you to listen to what will be presented in this courtroom with total attention."

You may find it helpful to sit in a posture that embodies dignity and presence, staying in touch with the feeling of your breath moving in and out as you listen to the evidence. Be aware of the tendency of your mind to jump to conclusions before all the evidence has been presented and the final arguments made. As best as you can, try to suspend judgment and simply witness with your full being everything being presented in the courtroom, moment by moment. If you find your attention wandering, you can always bring it back to your breathing and to what you're hearing, again and again. When the presentation of evidence is complete, then it will be your turn to deliberate together as a jury and come to a decision—but not before."

You could hear his wisdom in this instruction, the respect he wanted the jurors to offer to all that was going to unfold before them.

So we listen not with ideas of how it's supposed to be, but with a gracious, loving awareness. And as we do, instead of filtering everything through our thoughts, there's a kind of beginner's mind that opens, and we can see anew.

I remember a cartoon that showed two generals striding down the hall of the Pentagon with all their medals and decorations. One of them said to the other, "It really shook me. I dreamed the meek inherited the earth."

We all have our perspectives of how things should be. But what does it mean to live with beginner's mind, with an open heart, to value the sovereignty, the nobility of all?

Who you are is loving awareness. You have an original innocence that was born into you. And even with the conditioning and such common self-doubt and self-judgment and unworthiness, when you practice mindful loving awareness, you listen in a different way. You listen with the heart, and it expands the sense of not only who you are, but who we are.

We weep for all the parents who've lost a child or whose child is ill, for all those who are losing their rights. We rejoice for all the parents whose children succeed, for the sovereignty and rights that are growing for human beings. We hold them all in our hearts.

A poem for you, called "The Sleepless Ones":

What if all the people who could not sleep at two, three, or four in the morning left their houses and went to the parks? What if hundreds, thousands, millions went in their solitude like a stream, and each told their story?

What if there were old women fearful that if they slept they would die, and young women unable to conceive, or those seeking an abortion, or a child that was wrong to carry?

What if there were husbands having affairs, and children fearful of failing, and fathers worried about paying the bills, and women having business troubles, and men unlucky in love, and those in physical pain, and those who were guilty?

What if they all left their houses like a stream, and the moon illuminated their way, and they came, each one, to tell their stories?

Would these be the more troubled of humanity? Or would these be the more passionate of this world? Or those who need to create in order to live? Or would these be the lonely ones?

And I ask you, if they all came to the parks at night and told their stories, would the sun on rising be more radiant?

And again, I ask you—would they embrace?

You can feel this, what it would mean to listen to one another deeply.

I love the Quaker Listening Project. They've been going around the world now for decades—to Sudan and Libya and North Korea, places that people don't go—simply saying, "Tell me your story. Let me understand you." You can do it in your family, in conflict, in your community, with neighbors, in so many ways. But it means you have to be somehow flexible. You have to honor the sovereignty of each being.

I remember shortly after I got married to my beloved Trudy—and today is our wedding anniversary; I took her onto the Ferris wheel here in Santa Monica, in Venice, because that's where I proposed to her—at one point early in the marriage, she said she wanted to go somewhere and take a trip. I spent time planning it, trying to figure out how we'd fly there and where we'd stay. And then after a week or so, she said, "You know, I don't think I want to go there."

I got upset. I said, "Yes, but you said you wanted—" and on I went. I felt that upset rising in me. She smiled, looked at me, and said, "Jack, women change their minds."

Of course, men change their minds equally so. But there was something in the way she said it that just touched my heart. It's like—why would I judge? We all change our minds. Why would I get rigid?

And there was a sign posted on it that said, "Not accepting change, thanks." And then underneath it, somebody put another posted note that says, "Change is inevitable, deal with it."

This is the way this world is—it's not fixed. And the views aren't fixed, and even the court decisions, sometimes bad as they are, are not the end of the story. But the story will change also when we begin to listen to each other. Try it in your family; you'll find out they like it.

Even dogs like it. There's the story of this guy who had a Doberman, and he'd heard that cod liver oil was good for the coat of dogs. He would call his dog and grab its mouth and pull it open and pour in the cod liver oil, and the dog resisted and hated it. Then one day when he was trying to do it, he dropped the bottle and a whole puddle of cod liver oil spilled onto the kitchen floor. He went to get a mop, and when he came back, the dog was licking up the cod liver oil. The problem was not the cod liver oil, it turned out. It was the way he was trying to administer it or force it down the poor dog's throat.

When people ask for a little attention, it's not a little thing—it's a great thing. Because the whole path of awakening, of quieting the mind, seeing clearly, opening the heart, is based on respect. A generous heart. It's us. Not harming ourself, not harming others. Can we listen deeply?

A poem for you:

When someone deeply listens to you, it's like holding out a dented cup you've had since childhood and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water. When it balances on top of the brim, you are understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you, the room where you stay starts a new life. And the place where you wrote your first poem begins to glow in your mind's eye. It's as if gold has been discovered.

When someone deeply listens to you, your bare feet are on the earth, and a beloved land that seemed distant is now at home within you.

Wisdom and compassion for all that we have to hold as human beings. Can we actually listen in this way to one another, to ourself and others as we sit and walk and engage in our community, in our society, the joys and pains of it? Because the game is respect.

And I remember from a men's retreat years ago at Spirit Rock, there was a man—we were telling our stories about men—who had a blues radio show in Los Angeles on Sunday evenings. He said he'd studied and loved the blues for most of his life. He had a lot of listeners, many of whom were incarcerated men in prisons. He got a letter one day from a man in prison, Joe Johnson, who said, "I love listening to your show and I'd like to see if you can play these pieces from some of my favorite early bluesmen—from Muddy Waters and Blind Lemon Jefferson and a few others of the masters."

So the next week on his show, he said, "I got a letter from Joe Johnson, a man who obviously knows the history of the blues, a blues aficionado, and it's my pleasure to play first for Mr. Johnson these pieces from Blind Lemon Jefferson and Muddy Waters." And he did. A few weeks later another letter came from Joe Johnson. He said, "Thank you for listening to me, for playing those pieces. I love listening to that show. And more than anything, it's the first time I can remember my name being said with respect."

Imagine that. Imagine that.

Could the Palestinians and Israelis listen to one another and treat each other with respect? And the Hutus and the Tutsis? And the Northern Irish, and the Irish and the English, and the red states and the blue states?

But what about the big difficulties? Racism, economic injustice, endless wars, so many kinds of global dilemmas created by human beings. James Baldwin writes, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

And so there's pain and insecurity, and now you have to have respect for Mara. Mara who appeared to the Buddha in the form of greed and temptation and addiction—and that didn't move the Buddha. And then Mara appeared in the form of aggression, flaming arrows and swords—and that didn't move the Buddha. And then Mara appeared in doubt: "You'll never get enlightened. This won't work. You can't help other people." And that didn't move the Buddha.

Because each time, the Buddha responded by saying, "Oh, I see you, Mara. I know who you are. I see you." Not with fear, not with confusion—with a bow. "Is that you, Mara? Oh, yes. The Mara of doubt, the Mara of insecurity, the Mara of fear, the Mara of greed and aggression."

These are not small things. The power of greed, of hatred, of ignorance—huge. Civilizations, warfare, on and on. But when we see deeply, when we listen with the heart underneath all of that to the longings and the fears and the confusion and the pain that James Baldwin points to—the hurt that's underneath everything else.

I remember when Maha Ghosananda, the Cambodian teacher and colleague and friend, went to the U.S. Congress to testify on a ban for world landmines. When he came to Spirit Rock, he was raising money for artificial limbs for children who'd stepped on landmines in Cambodia, and crutches for people who'd been maimed. When he spoke to Congress, yes, he spoke about voting for the ban. But then he got quiet, and he said, "Before we can do that, the most important thing is to remove the landmines from our hearts." To remove the landmines from our hearts—the landmines of our aggression and fear, all those energies of Mara and confusion, the anger and blame and revenge.

Martin Luther King, after his church was bombed: "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. And we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you as well."

Without mindfulness and loving awareness, we get lost in polarization, isolation, separation, aggression, fear, racism, violence. The wonderful thing is that there is mindfulness. There is loving awareness. It is your birthright. O nobly born, remember who you really are. It is your sovereignty, and no one can take it from you. There can be laws one way or another, but the reality is that it's your heart and your spirit—they can put you in prison, but no one can take your spirit from you, or your choices.

When you realize this, it becomes an enormous blessing. William Butler Yeats, looking back on his life, said: "I am content to follow to its source every event in action and thought, measure the lot, forgive myself the lot. When such as I cast out remorse, so great a sweetness flows into the breast, for we must laugh and we must sing, for we are blessed by everything. And everything we look upon is blessed."

We have to live true to our values, true to the deepest place in our hearts of what we know is right and wise—the actions and thoughts of the wise ones. This is what the Buddha called them: the loving heart, the wise heart, the strong and courageous and steady heart. And we must do so, and then listen to each other. To see the sovereignty in one another, and respect it, and support it in whatever way we can. For all beings. For the benefit of all.

For we are the world. We are consciousness. We are the field of awareness having this human incarnation, this human life. And what we do makes a difference. When we embody respect, graciousness, loving awareness for all, when we listen deeply, we are changing the world person by person, piece by piece. And this is the only way that it happens. We add our voice. We add our love. We add our courage.

And we do so with the power of loving awareness and the freedom that it offers.

So I thank you. And I see so many more people on the screen than there had been in previous nights. Sadly, I'm not going to take time for questions and dialogue as I usually do after these talks, because it's my anniversary—happy wedding anniversary with my beloved Trudy.

I just wish blessings and well-being to you all. May we stand up for what matters, and may we do so with a wise and loving heart for all.

Thank you. Blessings. Good night.

CHAPTER 38

Wise Society | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 56 min

> *In this deeply personal and contemplative talk, Jack Kornfield addresses the Buddhist foundations for engaging with society's most challenging issues. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya and the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, he explores the Buddha's teachings on social harmony: meeting together with mutual respect, caring for the vulnerable, and honoring the natural environment. Kornfield emphasizes that dharma practice is not merely individual—our growing sense of interdependence reveals we are completely embedded in community, echoing Gandhi's observation that spirituality and politics cannot be separated.*
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> *Through the parable of the declining monastery transformed by treating each person as if they might be the Messiah, Kornfield illustrates the power of deep respect and sacred listening. He then courageously applies these principles to contemporary issues: abortion (honoring women's sovereignty while acknowledging the tenderness of the experience), the prison industrial complex (sharing moving stories from San Quentin's transformation programs), and war (examining causes and conditions rather than propaganda). Throughout, he returns to the Four Noble Truths—that suffering has causes in greed, hatred, and ignorance, and diminishes through generosity, love, and wisdom.*
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> *The talk offers not answers but contemplations, inviting practitioners to quiet the mind, open the heart, and listen with the thousand eyes of Avalokiteśvara. Kornfield concludes with a powerful question for daily practice: "What would love have me do today?" As the Buddha instructed his students, now it is time for each of us to do as we see fit—approaching even those we disagree with through the lens of mutual respect and compassion.*

The teachings are not something, as I often say, that you need to take notes or remember. There's no exam, there's no quiz. They're really more of a reflection of meditation. And tonight in particular, because of some topics that we find difficult, I don't want to teach as if I know the answers. My wife would be happily smiling when I say this. But I offer it really as a contemplation and as a reflection.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is wise society. Part of the reason for doing this is that last month, after I finished giving that talk which included the long and quite wonderful story of Sir Gawain and what it is that women want—those of you who attended know it's a story I love to tell—part of my reason for telling it was actually in response to the Supreme Court decisions recently, especially that about access to abortion, but

other things as well. The story really links to that in a certain way, but I didn't do it explicitly. And I felt wrong afterward, like I didn't really say what I wanted to say. So let's try it in a different way tonight.

The first thing is to say that it's a mistake to believe that dharma practice, the inner practice of liberation, is an individual matter. One of the deepest realizations that comes as we meditate, as we pay attention, as we live a life of care and loving awareness and mindfulness, is the growing sense of interdependence—that there's absolutely no separation between our body and the body of the earth, between our life and the DNA and body of the biosphere, the food we eat, and the beings that we live with. We are completely interdependent. And so when I think about teaching meditation and dharma, one of the things that's really obvious is that it has to include our embeddedness in the community in which we live.

Mahatma Gandhi put it explicitly. He said, "Those who say that spirituality has nothing to do with politics do not understand what spirituality really means." They come together.

There are many teachings about wise society. There's a beautiful book called *The Buddhist Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony* by Bhikkhu Bodhi, with a couple of hundred pages of passages from the Buddhist texts and teachings on this very topic. In one passage in the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha says there are four types of beings: those who practice for the welfare of themselves, those who practice for the welfare of others, those whose life and practice is neither for the benefit and welfare of themselves nor of others, and finally, those who practice for the welfare and benefit of themselves and others. This last is his invitation for a wise way of practice.

In another text, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, a beautiful text where he talks about wise society, he says: How can people live in harmony? If they meet together and listen to one another respectfully and depart in harmony, they will prosper and not decline. If they honor the healthy laws and traditions of the past that other human beings have passed down, they will prosper and not decline—if they don't forget those lessons. If they care for the vulnerable in the society, the children, those who are ill, anyone who's vulnerable, they will prosper and not decline. If they care for their natural environment around them, they will prosper and not decline. Wise society.

This is a divided time. We all know this. It's reflected in our divisive politics, which are more about fear and loss of power than love. We all know this. So then how do we go about attending to wise society? It asks for a kind of courage that is in part the courage of tenderness and vulnerability, of mutual respect.

There's a story I've read before, maybe even sometime in this last year, but I'm going to read again because it's illustrative, as was the Sir Gawain story. It concerns a monastery that has fallen on hard times. Once it was a great order with many houses and monks and nuns, but with the rise of secularism and the decline of those who wanted to join the monasteries—we can see it in our modern culture—it gradually declined until there was only the mother house, an abbot, and four others, all seventy years of age.

In the woods surrounding this great monastery, there was a little hut that the wise rabbi who lived in the town used as a place to meditate. The monks, who were tuned into their environment, could sense when the rabbi had come—the rabbi's in the woods. At one point, they looked at themselves and said, "We are a community in decline. We are about to lose our order. I wonder if the rabbi has anything he could say to help us. Some advice."

So the abbot went to greet the rabbi, his old friend. They embraced one another and gazed at one another.

You know, it's tough being an abbot. Ajahn Chah went over—we took him to the Spencer Abbey to see Father Thomas Keating, one of the greatest Catholic Cistercian monasteries. We stood there, and Thomas Keating was this great big tall monk wearing black and white, sort of penguin-style robes. Ajahn Chah was wearing his dusky forest off-orange robes, and he was sort of short and squat. They looked at each other. The first thing Ajahn Chah said to Thomas Keating—we were in the courtyard with a hundred monks who lived there, and the abbot—he looked at him and said, "I'm so sorry."

It's kind of a weird greeting. I was translating, and Thomas Keating said, "You're so sorry? What kind of greeting is that?"

And Ajahn Chah said—

You're the abbot." And then he turned to all the monks gathered there and said, "You have no idea how hard it is to be an abbot. You should really treasure this man." And Keating had this big smile on his face after that.

So the abbots embraced, and they talked about how hard things were in this world for those who are devoted to a spiritual life. And the rabbi said, "I don't really have any advice for you. The only thing I can tell you is some sense I have that the Messiah that you wait for is somehow among you." What a strange thing to say. But that's what he said in the end.

The old abbot of the monastery went back after seeing the rabbi, and the monks asked what he had said. "Well, it's the strangest thing," the abbot replied. "He said the Messiah is among you." They thought, what could that mean? Could it mean that one of the monks is the Messiah? Perhaps the abbot himself—after all, he's been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man, a man of light. Surely he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod. Elrod gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's side, when you look back at it, Elrod is virtually always right—often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elrod. But surely not Brother Philip. Philip's so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he does have a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

"Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did. Suppose I'm the Messiah. Oh my. I couldn't be that much."

And as they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect—on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people still came to visit, to picnic on the lawn, to wander some of the paths, to go to the old chapel as they always had. Without even any words, they began to sense an aura of extraordinary respect that now surrounded the five old monks. It began to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place—just like the metta you were just doing. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently—to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them, and their friends brought friends. Then it happened that some of the younger ones who came started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he might join them. And another. And another. Within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order. Thanks to the rabbi's wisdom, it became a vibrant center of spirituality and light for the community and all those around them. And I suppose, as the fairy tales go, it should be "they lived happily ever after"—or something like that.

So what does this say to us? First, it talks about quieting the mind and opening the heart. Listening deeply. Listening with respect to one another, to ourselves, to our own body and heart, to those around us—including those whom we might judge or disagree with initially.

Reflecting on this: How much respect do you give to those you disagree with? And what would they feel from you? Not that you have to share the same ideas, but is there that spirit of respect? Can you see them all? As Merton says, can you see the secret beauty behind their eyes? Can you see them all somehow with the heart open—even if you disagree?

Can you see like Quan Yin, with the eyes of compassion and the thousand arms and thousand eyes? You've seen those images of Avalokiteshvara, Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion. She's called "She Who Hears the Cries of the World." She listens to everyone's heart.

The Dharma, the teachings, is the medicine for the world. And part of this medicine is the invitation to this capacity that we have—to listen deeply and to listen with respect. The teachings of the Dharma, beginning with the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, say that suffering for us as human beings in this human incarnation exists.

There is suffering individually and globally, and it has its causes—the Second Noble Truth. The causes of suffering are greed, hatred, and ignorance. The more that we live with and promote and embody greed, or hatred with all of its judgment and anger, or ignorance, the more there will be suffering.

And yet the opposite is also true. Instead of greed, the more there's generosity. Instead of hate, the more there's love and care. Instead of ignorance, the more there's wisdom and truth-seeing, truth-telling. Then the greater happiness and wellbeing. It's not very complicated.

It's a little bit horrifying to look around the world, because there are so many avenues promoting greed in our culture, promoting hatred, promoting lack of truth and ignorance. The point isn't simply to fix it. But the point is to see it clearly, because without seeing it, we can't go another way. Things can seem like they've always been that way—but they haven't, and they don't have to be.

I was so moved today when I listened to a bit of the broadcast of the Pope apologizing to all those native people of Canada—and it could be the US as well—who were stolen from their parents and put into residential schools, places often of torment and abuse, for a hundred years. He apologized. He said there's no excuse. But the amazing

thing is that this was taken for granted for a long time. And yet when we hear now and see, we know how wrong it was. This is especially apparent to those who are not part of the dominant dimension of the culture—the women and the BIPOC people.

Let me tell a little moment. I had led a series of meetings for Buddhist teachers from around the world for thirty, forty years, bringing teachers together. One year back in the early nineties, we brought lamas and swamis and mambas and many Western teachers together with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. There we were, seated in his palace, and part of our reason to come together was to reaffirm our ethics and talk about some of the difficulties that had been happening with various Buddhist masters—not to speak of clergy in other religions, political figures, coaches, and all those things. The abuse of power. But we wanted to address it directly. We had this meeting to see how we could operate in a way that safeguards students and teachers. It was very moving, actually, and not easy, because there were some people in the room that everybody knew had been perpetrators of suffering.

At one point, one of the Tibetan nuns who'd come, Tenzin Palmo—she lived in a cave for twelve years, an amazing, wonderful woman—talked about how incredibly hard it was for the nuns and for the women in Tibetan Buddhism. How the men had the good food and the warm places in the monastery, while the women were working in the kitchen or outside. How difficult it was.

The Dalai Lama began to weep. He said, "I knew it was hard. I didn't know it was this hard."

Then Sylvia Wetzel, a teacher from Germany, said, "Your Holiness, can I teach you a meditation?" It was great. The Tibetans would never dare to do that, but you know how we are as Westerners—we're weird and willing to stick our necks out. Everyone gasped. And he said, "Of course."

So she said, "I want you to look around." The room was filled with beautiful thangkas and imagery and statues. "Now close your eyes." She guided him, and everyone. "I'd like you to quiet now, and imagine that there's a little reversal. You see the sixteen thangkas around the room of the great masters and teachers, but now you look at them and they're all in female form. Every one of them—Je Tsongkhapa and all these great masters. And you look and you see that there's a woman in every one of these thangkas. Then you turn around and look at the altar, and all the statues are of female Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Then you look to either side, and there are all those companions in the holy life with you, all these senior women, wise women. And then you look at your

own body and you go, 'Oh my, I am the Fourteenth Dakini Dalai Lama.' And you've always been born in a woman's body, because they say that even though men can get enlightened, it's much better to be born in a woman's body."

I tell you, the room was in shock, and I just loved it. It was one of the great moments, because there we were, surrounded by the patriarchy which has been a big part of Buddhist culture—culture around the world. And here was Sylvia flipping the table in such a creative and wonderful way.

Afterward, the Dalai Lama cried a little bit, and he said, "I will do my best to help women become empowered, even in Buddhist tradition, even though it's not what our culture has done before." And slowly it's happened. Slowly.

Patriarchy—you may have noticed it.

It's not just there in the religious or spiritual world. We're all worried about climate change, and yet when you look at Project Drawdown and the greatest science about what will help reverse climate change, as you heard me say, the number one thing at the top of the list is not wind or solar power or change in agriculture. The most effective change of all would be the empowerment of girls and women. That would change the world more radically.

So this means we have to listen, like the monks in that story, to one another with a kind of respect for each being—not in the old way, but in a sacred way, in some new fashion. Even those we might disagree with, like Brother Philip and Brother Elrad at the store and so forth.

My beloved Trudy Goodman, my partner and wife and also dharma teacher, founder of InsightLA, recently went through treatment for uterine cancer. She'd been bleeding a bit and got tested, and it turned out it was cancer. She had major surgery, a radical hysterectomy. We were quite worried, but it turned out fortunately to be very early stage. They said this was all the treatment that she needed, so she's gradually getting better, although it takes a while after surgery.

But some of the remarkable things about it—first of all, she wanted a woman surgeon. We found the top surgeon at UCLA, did it in Los Angeles together. And she said it was amazing. "I went into the operating room and it was all women—the doctors, the nurses, everyone there." She said it made her feel like she was in the right place.

She had the surgery, and when she came out, the nurse who came to take care of her in the recovery room—I came up to see her then—and Trudy said, "What's your name?" She said, "Petra." Trudy said, "What kind of name is that?" I was sitting there looking at my phone or something. Petra said, "It's a Thai name." And Trudy said, "Oh, my husband speaks Thai."

I looked up and I said hello in Thai. She said, "How do you speak Thai?" I said, "Oh, I had been a monk in Thailand." And then she looked and she said, "Are you Jack Kornfield?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Oh, my teacher is Ajahn Chah! I grew up in the province where Ajahn Chah was. He's my teacher. I know you're a student. We have the same teacher." And she came and she bowed and she was so excited. And she said, "Oh, Trudy, you are the dharma teacher here."

It was like we were surrounded by these women who were so loving and supportive. And when Trudy had to get up and do her first walk down the long corridor of the recovery room and back, she started to walk very slowly, and Petra said to her, "Trudy, where is your mind now?" And Trudy said, "It's in my feet." Petra said, "Yes, you must keep it in your body."

Then she started giving us all these dharma teachings—death can come at any time, you must live in the present and pay attention, and so forth. It was kind of wild.

But what's happened since then is Trudy has been sharing this whole journey. At first she was keeping it private, but then on Instagram and in all kinds of ways, she began telling her story, showing images. And she's gotten back hundreds and hundreds of responses from women who say people don't talk so much—certainly in her generation, our generation—about their uterus and their ovaries and surgery and the female organs. And Trudy just, as she does, put it all out there.

She said, "In this time, when in the culture the feminine is not being uplifted but in ways is actually being denigrated, it really feels important that we come together and see the beauty of the feminine and that we uplift it together in some way."

And then Petra said, "Listen, you are the one to heal yourself. You must listen to yourself."

I felt during this whole process these different levels of experience. One that was predominant at times was concern and worry. Will she be okay? I love her.

You know, all the thoughts that we have, especially during almost the week that we had to wait for the pathology report to find out how far the cancer had spread and what kind it actually was. And finally, we got this very good report.

Another dimension at the same time was almost as if I could become vast and silent and say, well, this is human incarnation. Old age, sickness, and death are part of the noble truths of what the Buddha spoke about. It's what comes into human incarnation. We may have many of them in fact, and that's what's happening now. And there's this vast perspective, and the Dharma is to hold it all in compassion and to see it clearly, but not to be so caught by it.

So now I want to move on and talk about something related and even more difficult, which is abortion. And I want to talk about it through the lens of sovereignty from the talk last week, for those of you who attended, on what it is that women want. And from the lens of respect, because this topic is so polarized. Whatever your views about it, this is a reflection. It's a time to meditate and consider.

Because it gets so polarized. On one side, in the polarized view, it's always bad. It's a terrible thing. We must do everything to stop it. You know that view, the anti-abortion view. And then on the other side, it can be called a simple procedure. A medical procedure. People should have the right to their own medical procedure on their own bodies.

But of course, it's not just a medical procedure. And it's not just one thing or the other. And to listen with respect requires a kind of vulnerability and tenderness as we struggle with it.

Long ago when I was much younger, I was with a woman who got pregnant, and it was a little bit of a dangerous pregnancy because she got pregnant on a coil in a way that wasn't necessarily healthy. And we also were really not ready to have a child. So we decided together to have an abortion. And it was hard. It wasn't just an easy thing. It took a lot of consideration and care and thoughtfulness and pain in some cases and struggle. So the idea that an abortion is nothing, just a quick procedure, isn't the truth.

My dear friend Yvonne Rand, who died a few years ago, was one of the main Dharma successors of Suzuki Roshi in San Francisco Zen Center. And she used to host these ceremonies that came from Japan for water babies. It was a ritual primarily for women, although men could attend, who had lost babies through miscarriage, or abortion if they chose that, or other reasons—stillbirth. And women flocked to them because they held in their bodies the kind of loss, and some men too, that it represented. And there was no judgment in it. It didn't say this was wrong or this was right. It was just a tenderness holding our human incarnation, saying this is one of the things we have to struggle with. It's not nothing.

And I know I talk really personally. Back in some of the deepest places in my meditation and my inner exploration, I had the sense, the vision, the experience of past lives and being born—in deepest meditations and breathwork. A few of those births and deaths were as a tiny little embryo which either miscarried or got aborted. And I can remember feeling I didn't have a personality, I didn't have a life, I didn't know anything, but I could feel I was alive. And I wanted to cling to that life as all life does. And then it was gone. Wow. And then I could feel the cycling to come back again to take another birth. You can believe what you do. I'm just reporting my experience.

Does this mean that therefore we should ban abortion? Not in the slightest. Women need the sovereignty over their own bodies and hearts, and it cannot be dictated to another human being. And if my daughter Caroline was to come to me and say that she wanted or felt that it was right or she needed to have an abortion, I would want my daughter to have that choice, as much as every other woman.

Now, the truth is that more women die in pregnancy in the US than any other developed country because we don't care for them so well. The majority of abortions happen to women in their twenties who are already moms and overwhelmed and can't take care of more children, or have some other part of their life where there are reasons that they cannot. And the truth is that society doesn't support mothers and children, and you know that. We are something like thirtieth or fiftieth on the list of developed and developing nations in terms of how much our society supports women and childcare.

It's crazy—10 times or 50 times as much in other countries as here.

So what does this mean? It means it's not a simple thing. It's tender and vulnerable. It touches on the mystery of incarnation. It happens—just as I described feeling that experience of being born again and again several times in that way. It's certainly not the purview of others to tell a woman what she should do. Even though I can respect those who are the most caring on the pro-life side, I can listen and really respect that. My deepest respect is for the sovereignty of women themselves.

This is really a reflection of our practice of mutual respect—of not lording it over another being, but meeting them as they did in that monastery, seeing each other with the eyes of deep respect. The Buddha's teaching on wise society is not about rigidity or taking a side, but about whether you can come together and hear one another in harmony. Meet with respect, depart with respect. Listen with the body and the heart, hold it all in compassion.

One of the things that strikes me in the Buddhist texts is that at the end of his dialogues with many people who came to see the Buddha—people who said, "Give me teachings of liberation or compassion," or "How do I manage my life?" or "What do I do in this difficult human life?"—and all the different problems people brought, the Buddha would respond as he did. And there are many, many stories and accounts of these dialogues. They end with him saying something very powerful. He looks kindly at that person, as he was the compassionate one. And then he says, "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." It's a really powerful phrase. He gave the best teachings he could. He pointed them in a direction and they had an amazing experience. And he said, "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." He placed it in the good hearts and hands of that individual who was there in front of him.

We live in a current climate of fear. And when we consider wise society on different sides, there's the fear of the loss of the spiritual. We live in a society that's partly characterized by the absence of the sacred, the loss of values, the loss of church. But unfortunately, the response is more about power. Who's losing power? Who has power? Not a response of love or a sense of the sacred. The Buddhist teachings for wise society say one must look not at the results but at the causes and conditions that allow for respect—of the land, of climate, of one another.

Let's talk about another difficult topic since we're in these deep waters here. I hope it's okay for you. Take a breath.

I want to talk about our prison system because it fits with tonight's teaching. The US has the largest prison system on the entire planet. We have less than 20% of the world's population and this enormous multi-million person, multi-hundreds-of-billions-of-dollars system of locking people up. There is a prison industrial pipeline that goes from the poorest communities right into our prisons. You all know this.

I remember when I brought a group of people together with the Dalai Lama—people who'd been in prison and practicing dharma and somehow got out—to try to educate him about the US, because he seemed to think things were really good here in all kinds of ways. And he wanted to know: What is your American suffering? How can the dharma help? So we brought these people together and he was astonished to hear about the prison system. And I remember one of the young men said, "You have to understand, Your Holiness." He stood up—his name was Amos—and he said, "Man, you gotta get it. They want us in prison. In my hood, in my neighborhood, that was where you were headed."

So Jacques Verduin, one of our community at Spirit Rock, starting almost 30 years ago, began what was called the Insight Prison Project.

And he looked around the room and he said, "I can't read my poem yet."

There were about 300 people in the audience—corrections officials and politicians, the local mayor, the families of these men. And he said, "You men, when you stood up and said you would not be violent men, you also gave us an apology." They said it collectively and deliberately: "For all the ways that we have caused suffering to those we hurt, to our families, to our communities, in all these ways, we feel that suffering now and we apologize. We deeply apologize." And you could feel it.

Luis said, "I can't read you my poem, because it's not just you who needs to apologize." And he turned around and looked at the room—the corrections people, the people from the police, the politicians and various other folks. And he said, "You know, it's we who failed you as well. Almost every one of you was born into a community where you as a child was not protected. You weren't protected from racism. You weren't protected from the poverty where you lived. You weren't given an education that really enhanced your life and protected you. There are so many ways we did not care for you or protect you. And standing here, I offer you an apology on our behalf for what happened to you."

It was an amazing moment. Everybody in the room got quiet. It turned the tables. And then he read his poem.

We're in this together, you know—when we listen with respect. Like that story. We can see the causes and conditions. We can see how we treat the vulnerable among us, as the Buddha said—the homeless, the undocumented, those children who were brought here as young children and still can't live full lives, even though they never lived anywhere else. And our political system doesn't care for them. We're in this together.

I led a men's group with Robert Hall at Spirit Rock some years ago. In the evening, we had a circle where men would get in the middle and tell stories of their lives. One man who was in the middle said he had a radio show in Los Angeles—a blues show. He said, "I'm on every Sunday night, and I get lots of fan letters from people who love the blues. But I especially get letters from men who are inside prisons, because this is one of the things they have—the ability to listen. I got a letter one time from a man named Joe Johnson. And he said, 'I so love your show. I listen every week. I'm a great fan of the blues. And I'd like to ask, would you play some of the early classics? Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters, some of the other great blues masters?'"

So the week after he got the letter, he said on air, "This is going out to a man, Joe Johnson, who clearly knows the history of the blues. It's an honor to play these songs for you, Joe." And he played some of the great old classics.

Two or three weeks later, he received a note from Joe Johnson thanking him. It said, "Thank you. Thank you for playing those for me." And then he said, "It's the first time in my life I can remember hearing my name said with respect."

How about that?

Talking about causes and conditions and respect for one another—we're in this together.

One more story, since we're talking about difficult things. We're reflecting, we're meditating. Let's talk about war.

It's so easy to get fixated, because there's a lot of propaganda. That word is flying around. Now, it's true that what Putin is doing in Ukraine is terrible, but there are also terrible wars all around the world that we're not paying attention to—in Sudan and in Myanmar and so many other places. But if we look at causes and conditions, we have to understand something different. If we look through the eyes of the Dharma and respect for one another.

I was at Ajahn Chah's monastery as a monk, in the Malay Peninsula. His monastery, which was a metta monastery—that was the main practice of loving-kindness—was in a rubber forest going up the mountainside. There was a lot of fighting at that time. There were communist insurgents in the mountains and the Thai military there. It was during the 1960s and early 70s. Sometimes at night there would be firefights around. When it got close, you could actually see the flash of the guns and hear all that.

Ajahn Chah was known as a peacemaker. He would go to each side and give them amulets to try to protect everyone from being hurt.

But one morning, after a big firefight that was close to the monastery, I was sitting in a clearing doing my meditation and there was an older monk there. A helicopter came over the ridge about a mile or mile and a half away, and it started dropping canister bombs. You could see the explosions up at the top of the ridge.

I said to the old monk, "Well, they must have come to bomb those communist insurgents, or whatever you call them, who were fighting down here last night."

The old monk looked at me and said, "Nah."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, those insurgents—they live in caves about ten kilometers north, two valleys over. We know where they live."

"Well, why are they bombing here?"

He looked at me and said, "There aren't that many of them. If they kill them all off, who would give them the helicopters and all this money?"

The Pentagon is so happy that we have Russia as a new enemy again, returned as an enemy. We who are the largest weapons suppliers on the face of the earth, and then worry that we're not safe.

So we look at causes and conditions. If we look with respect, what does it mean to see honestly and listen deeply to the cries of the world, as Kuan Yin does? What is the answer?

It starts in our hearts. Quiet the mind. Open the heart. Listen with respect. See each other with respect. See ourselves with respect.

And to have both a vast perspective—that this is human incarnation. It's not pretty. It's magnificent and beautiful and creative in all these ways. And it's also difficult. There is suffering, but there are causes and conditions, and it can increase or decrease. If we honor one another, the sovereignty of one another, with respect. If we listen in ourselves in a deep way.

The text says: Others will be cruel; we shall be kind—thus we will incline the heart. Others will kill living beings; we shall protect them—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will steal or be greedy; we shall be generous—thus shall we incline the heart. Others will speak falsely; we shall tell the truth, speak truth—thus we will incline the heart. Others will be arrogant; we will have humility—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will be unmindful; we will listen with mindfulness—thus we will incline the heart. Others will lack wisdom and compassion; we will develop wisdom and compassion—thus we will incline the heart.

You become a Buddha. You steady your heart. You listen. You trust your body. You see how difficult it is to be human, and how magnificent and beautiful. You see that suffering isn't the end of the story.

Otherwise we wouldn't have Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. We wouldn't have Wangari Maathai and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and all these Nobel laureates who rose above the suffering of the world and show us there's another way.

You are one of them.

And when you meditate, meditation is just a kind of preparation for living wisely. Then in the end, you can listen to this one question: What would love have me do today? With all these things we're concerned about, can we listen? Can we approach them, approach one another, with respect? Quiet the mind. Feel the vastness of life. What would love have me do today?

So these are reflections for you on difficult topics. They're not answers. They're not saying how you should be. As the Buddha says, now it's time for you to go and do as you see fit. But they're reminders of something that you really know and that you can trust.

CHAPTER 39

Tree of Enlightenment Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 25 min

> *In this gentle guided meditation, Jack Kornfield invites practitioners to take their seat "halfway between heaven and earth, under your own tree of enlightenment" — evoking the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree as a template for our own practice. The meditation establishes a foundation of stability and ease in the body before turning attention to the breath as an anchor for presence.*
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> *Kornfield emphasizes that the purpose of ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing) is not to become a "good breather" but to use the breath as a vehicle for steadying attention and cultivating presence. He offers the simple instruction of noting "calm" or "steady" with each breath, and uses the memorable image of training a puppy — "sit, stay" — to describe the patient, gentle quality of returning attention again and again.*
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> *The meditation then expands to include working with "waves" of experience — emotions, thoughts, and sounds that arise more prominently. Kornfield teaches the practice of gentle mental noting (vedanā and saññā recognition): acknowledging what arises with labels like "sad, sad" or "planning, planning," feeling the energy move through, and returning to breath when it passes. Throughout, he emphasizes that we are not merely observing experience but recognizing ourselves as "mindful, loving awareness" itself — the peaceful witness in the midst of all arising and passing phenomena.*

Let yourself sit in a way that's stable and comfortable—perhaps feet flat on the floor if you're on a chair, or on a cushion, whatever way lets your body feel grounded and steady.

Settling yourself, you take your seat halfway between heaven and earth, under your own tree of enlightenment.

Let your eyes close gently, or if there's any problem with that, at least lower your gaze. Begin with two or three long breaths, and with each exhale, let go of whatever wants to be released.

As you sit, let your body be both present and also relaxed. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find the simple upright. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body resting on your seat, and how, as you let go, the earth completely supports you. You take your seat in the middle of all experience as the Buddha that you are.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now, to bring the body and mind and heart together just here in the present, begin to notice how your body is breathing itself—this miraculous expanding and contracting, the in and out of the breath. Exchanging air with the leaves of the trees around you and with the breath of every other living being on earth, we share this atmosphere. Feel it wherever you can sense it: coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly.

Sense this living breath, relaxing as you feel each breath come and go.

The point of awareness of breathing is not to become a good breather—your body already does that beautifully—but to use it to steady and calm the attention and become more present. If it's hard to feel the breath, put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand. With each breath, if it's helpful, you can whisper softly: *calm* or *steady* or *ease* in the background as you relax into feeling the breath.

As you feel the breath, there will be, of course, sounds and thoughts and emotions that arise at the same time. Let them be in the background for now. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Your attention, calm and steady, is just to feel this breath in the middle of it all.

When the attention wanders off, as it will often, when you notice, gently come back to the next breath. Again and again, returning to this breath. Like training the puppy: sit, stay. Rest your attention, ease and calm, this breath. Bring it back over and over. Sit, stay.

Let it gradually settle. Invite it to feel this breath and relax into it. This breath, rising and falling or coming in and out. Relaxing. Ease. Steady.

You're establishing a presence of mindful, loving awareness of the breath. This breath: beginning, middle, and an end, and a space arising. Then the next breath. This breath. Rest in it.

Now, as you continue to steady the attention with the breath, with mindfulness of breathing, you can open the field of attention. When one of the background waves becomes strong—not just in the background, but a strong wave of emotion, of sadness or excitement or longing, or a loud sound, or a big thought: planning, remembering, figuring out, worrying—when a big wave arises, you can let go of the attention to the breath. With the same mindful, loving awareness, you can acknowledge the wave, naming it gently: *sad, sad*, or *excited, excited*, or *planning, planning*.

Feel the whole energy of that wave of emotion or thought or sound. *Hearing, hearing.* Let it rise and move through the body and mind as you name it gently. Then, when it passes away—which it will—let there be a quiet moment, and then return to the breath.

You rest just here in the reality of this moment, the present, feeling the breath as it breathes itself, or naming gently and acknowledging the big waves of experience as they rise for a time and then pass away.

You sit like the Buddha—kind, loving awareness—allowing things to rise and pass. And you are the awareness itself. You are the loving awareness that witnesses them all.

Keep it simple. This breath, calm, steady. Or this wave of experience. Name gently: planning, planning; sad, sad; excited, excited. And you remain the loving witness. You are mindful, loving awareness, noticing just now the arising and passing. And you are still and peaceful in the midst of it all.

You are the mindful loving awareness. The Buddha seated just where you are. Noticing the breath and the waves of experience. And you are the loving awareness itself.

Rest in it.

Trust it.

So let your eyes open again gently, staying with the quality of presence, mindful presence, or loving awareness.

CHAPTER 40

The Reality of the Present Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 27 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers essential instruction in vipassanā (insight meditation), making it accessible for both newcomers and experienced practitioners. He begins by establishing a grounded, embodied presence—inviting practitioners to feel their connection to the earth, soften the body, and settle into what he calls "the reality of the present."*
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> *The practice unfolds in two stages that reflect classical mindfulness training. First, Kornfield guides attention to the breath as an anchor, using it not to become "a good breather" but to cultivate ease, calm, and presence. He offers the gentle image of training a puppy—"sit, stay"—as a kind approach to the wandering mind, free from judgment. He also incorporates Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching of the half-smile to soften the practice.*
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> *The meditation then expands into choiceless awareness, where strong experiences—thoughts, emotions, sounds—are received rather than pushed away. Kornfield teaches the practice of gentle mental noting (planning, remembering, sadness, fear) while feeling these experiences as waves passing through body and mind. Throughout, he emphasizes resting as "the loving witness of life itself," embodying what he calls "mindful loving awareness"—a quality of presence that is steady, gracious, and kind amidst all that arises and passes away.*

If you would, let yourself find a way to sit that is stable and comfortable, at ease, and allow your eyes to close gently when you're ready to do a bit of meditation together.

With your eyes closed, sense yourself just seated here in the reality of the present. Just now. Be here now, this moment.

Begin by taking two long, deep breaths. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel a connection to the earth beneath you—the hardness of your seat, your buttocks and feet on the floor or chair, held to mother earth by gravity. Feel the steadiness of taking this seat halfway between heaven and earth, under your own tree of enlightenment. Steady and grounded.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this quality of embodied presence, begin to notice with mindful, loving awareness the play of experience. You are the loving witness of life itself.

For many, to start, it's helpful to feel the body breathing as a way to quiet the mind and soften the heart. You can feel it as coolness in the nostrils, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to feel the breath, you can put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

The point of mindfulness of breathing is not to become a good breather, but with each breath to invite a sense of greater ease and presence and calm. Breathing in and out gently, you can even whisper "ease" or "calm" with each breath. No judgment—just a simple returning to the breath. Like training the puppy: sit, stay. You return gently when you notice the attention has wandered. Sit, stay for a few breaths. And when it wanders off, bring it back gently. Each time you feel the breath, you're deepening the sense of presence.

Relax with each breath. If you like, you can put a half smile on your face, as Thich Nhat Hanh recommends—the half smile of the Buddha. As you feel the breath, let the other thoughts and sounds and sensations rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel this breath gently moving moment by moment, arising and passing away. Keep a beginner's mind: this breath, just as it is, arising and passing with ease, with calm.

Now, having invited the mind and heart to quiet a bit, to settle and calm with the breath, let's expand the field of our attention. When a background wave becomes quite strong—the planning mind, or an emotion of sadness or excitement, or a loud sound—when some wave becomes strong and pulls your attention from the breath, instead of pushing it away, let go of awareness of breathing and receive that sound or that emotion or that thought with the same mindful loving awareness. As if with a bow, you can name it gently: planning, or remembering, or sadness, or fear, or longing, or love, or hearing.

As you name it—sad, sad, or remembering, remembering—feel it as a wave passing through the body and mind. Name it gently. And when the wave subsides, return back to the breath for a time. Rest in the reality of the present.

You become the field of mindful, loving awareness that notices this breath, or gently acknowledges the waves, the strong waves of experience, naming them, letting them rise and pass. You are the loving awareness itself—quiet and present, steady, receiving it all with kindness.

With mindful loving awareness, you sit like the Buddha, gracious and wise amidst it all. As it all arises and passes away, you rest in a deep stillness, vast stillness amidst it all.

Present. Gracious. Loving awareness.

Allow your eyes to open, keeping the same sense of presence as you do.

This meditation is the fundamentals of Vipassana, or insight meditation—starting with the breath or some other focus that helps calm and steady the mind and soften the heart, and then beginning to open to feel the waves of experience received in a field of mindful loving awareness.

CHAPTER 41

Beacon of Love Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 24 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers a beautiful and accessible practice of mettā bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation), drawing on the traditional method outlined in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta. He guides practitioners through the progressive stages of cultivating loving-kindness, beginning with an easily loved being, then receiving mettā back from those we've blessed, extending compassion to ourselves, and finally radiating love outward to ever-widening circles of beings.*
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> *The meditation uses simple, heartfelt phrases—may you be filled with loving-kindness, may you be safe and protected, may you be well and strong, may your struggles be held in compassion—as vehicles for opening the heart. Kornfield emphasizes that the practice isn't about forcing feelings but about planting seeds of intention that will naturally grow over time. He acknowledges that sometimes the practice feels mechanical or even brings up resistance, and offers gentle encouragement to simply continue with patience.*
>
> *The practice culminates in a powerful visualization of becoming a lighthouse or beacon of love, extending mettā to all beings without exception—including those who are struggling, those who are afraid, and even those causing harm. Kornfield grounds the meditation in present-day reality by referencing contemporary movements for justice and freedom, demonstrating how this ancient practice remains vitally relevant. The session closes with an invitation to see the world with fresh eyes of mystery and love, carrying the spirit of mettā into daily life.*

So let yourself settle where you sit, and try to sit in a way that's comfortable—where you'll be awake, but at ease. It's very hard to do loving kindness meditation if your back is killing you or your knees. So you want to be, as you can, respectfully comfortable and present.

Once you have settled yourself, halfway between heaven and earth in this human form, you take your seat. Let your eyes close gently. Take two long breaths in and out, and let the body, the heart, and mind all begin to settle. The body breathes itself, and you can relax and let there be a gracious, loving awareness of whatever is present.

Into this space of presence and loving awareness, let us now practice the traditional loving kindness meditation in at least one form, and invite the quality of loving kindness to flower and open in your own heart and your own consciousness.

First, let yourself think of someone, some being that you know, who is easy to love—unconflicted, easy, gracious, someone you care about. It doesn't have to be this fantastic relationship, just someone where there's a natural feeling of care and love. And if there isn't any being that comes to mind, you can even use your dog, who generally speaking loves you quite unconditionally—or a little bit conditionally, depending on the dog food.

Picture and remember and envision this person, someone you naturally feel kindness and love toward. As you see them in the mind's eye, let yourself get quiet. Sense that you can wish them well, that your care can be expressed as loving kindness. Whisper in the mind or the heart some simple phrases of well-wishing, some simple intention: May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be held in great loving kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well and strong.

Become aware also of the measure of struggles in this person's life, as in all life—their difficulties. May you hold your struggles in great compassion. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

Repeat again, letting the feeling of loving kindness and care grow as you do. May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well, strong, healed. May your struggles be held in great compassion and kindness. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

As you do this, know that sometimes the feelings will arise more strongly. Sometimes it can feel a bit mechanical, or even bring up its opposite. You just keep planting the seeds of loving kindness, little by little by little, and they will grow.

Now think of another person you care about. Bring them into the mind's eye and heart—someone again where it's easy, natural to feel care. As you picture them, offer the same well-wishing and intention: May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well, strong, and healed. May your struggles be held in compassion and kindness. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

Now let yourself imagine or picture or sense that these two beings you have held with loving kindness, to whom you have offered your thoughts and intentions of love—that they gaze back at you. You can see them looking at you with kindly eyes. They want to send back to you the same loving kindness that you offered to them. They care about you.

They gaze at you and they say: May you too be filled with loving kindness. May you too be safe and protected. May you too be well, strong, and healed. Take in their well wishes. May you hold all your struggles in compassion and kindness. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

Taking it in, if it feels right, you can even put a hand on your heart. They've wished this for you, and you can wish the same for yourself, just as they wish for you—these people who care about you. May I be filled with loving kindness amidst it all. May I be safe and protected. May I be well, strong, and healed.

May I hold my struggles with great compassion. Feel the tenderness of that. And filled with loving kindness, may I be happy—truly happy.

Let the happiness and kindness fill your body, fill the cells, fill the whole of your being.

Now that the heart has invited the quality of loving kindness to grow, to open, let's extend it further. Let yourself think of someone you care about who's maybe struggling, who could use an infusion of loving kindness. As the heart opens and you picture them: May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well, healed and strong. May you hold all your struggles in compassion, kindness, tenderness. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

Now let this loving kindness spread. Pick another person and silently—whoever you choose—extend the loving kindness further, using the same well-wishing, or whatever phrases express your heart's care.

Now sense yourself as a lighthouse, a beacon of love. Let the feelings of loving kindness and whatever well-wishing phrases arise in you extend to the circle of all your friends and family—all of them. The easy ones and the not-so-easy ones. You know who I mean.

May you all be filled with loving kindness, all of you. Safe and protected, all of you. Well and strong and healed, all friends and family. May you hold your struggles in compassion and tenderness—all your struggles. And filled with loving kindness, may you be happy.

Now let the loving kindness spread across the community around you, however big it is—the neighbors and community, the place you live. You are the lighthouse, sending love to beings large and small in every direction.

Now let your loving kindness spread across the whole world, omitting none, as it says in the Loving Kindness Sutra. Spread to beings who are struggling. You can think of all those women marching in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini, just wanting some freedom. May they be safe and protected, filled with love—just as so many of us marched for Breonna Taylor and others in this country. But omitting none, sending the

loving kindness to all beings, far and near. May your hearts open in loving kindness. Even those who are afraid, even those who are acting in ways that bring harm—may you remember love. May you foster loving kindness and well-being.

Now you extend loving kindness so naturally that it becomes who you are. You are love, connected to all, part of it all, filled with loving kindness. Quiet now, and deep. You are like the earth herself, blessing all beings.

Rest in love.

And staying with the spirit of loving kindness, let your eyes open gently. Look around at this amazing world you find yourself in, as if you were transported from some other planet. Here you are, on earth, and your assignment is to see it with the eyes of mystery and love, with surprise.

CHAPTER 42

Waves of Experience Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 19 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers foundational instructions for mindfulness practice, framing it as cultivating "mindful, loving awareness." The practice begins with establishing physical stability and ease in the body, systematically relaxing the face, jaw, neck, shoulders, and belly while connecting with the support of the earth beneath.*
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> *The central metaphor of the meditation is the ocean and its waves. Kornfield instructs practitioners to use the breath as an anchor while allowing all other experiences—sounds, sensations, emotions, and thoughts—to rise and fall like waves around this center point. When attention is pulled by a "big wave" of strong sensation, emotion, or thought, practitioners learn to receive it with loving awareness, gently name it ("sadness," "planning," "tingling"), allow it to be fully felt, and watch it pass away in its own time before returning to the breath.*
>
> *This practice reflects core teachings from the Satipaṭṭhāna tradition, integrating awareness of body (kāyānupassanā), feeling-tones (vedanānupassanā), mind states (cittānupassanā), and mental phenomena (dhammānupassanā). Kornfield emphasizes that awareness itself—steady, calm, and compassionate—is our true nature. The meditation concludes with an invitation to recognize oneself as "the awakened one, as awareness itself," carrying this open-hearted presence into daily life with love, compassion, and freedom.*

Find a way to sit that is stable and comfortable. Settling the physical body and finding a stable seat is very helpful in stabilizing and quieting the mind. Once you find a way for your body to be stable and comfortable, if it's okay, allow your eyes to close gently for this time.

We'll go through some basic instructions for those who are new, or as a reminder of mindfulness practice—mindful, loving awareness—and we'll have periods of silence.

With your eyes closed, first take a couple of long breaths and let go of whatever wants to be released. Bring your attention to this precious human body you've been given. First, to your face. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little bit of a circle to release your neck. Let yourself find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax. Let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body—buttocks and legs and feet—carrying this weight. And feel how the seat you're on and the earth beneath can completely support you. You can relax and be held by Mother Earth just here, steady and present. Let the belly be soft, and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, with a mindful loving awareness, begin to notice what's here, this moment in the present. There will be physical sensations—all the energies and sensations of the body, pleasant and painful. Tingling, warm, cold. Places of tension and ease. There will be emotions, states of mind and feelings. There will be thoughts, pictures and words. And you become the loving witness to it all, steady and calm.

To help with this steadiness, one common practice is to start by feeling the body breathing itself—the breath—amidst all the sounds and sensations and thoughts. Feel your breath: coolness in the nostrils, or swirling tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's difficult to sense the breath, put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall on the palm of your hand.

With each breath, invite a sense of ease or calm. You can even whisper these words in the back of the mind, allowing the breath to invite the mind and heart and body to settle. As you sense the breath, there will be thoughts and sounds, feelings and emotions, sensations. Let all the other experiences that come and go rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

Feel how this breath keeps breathing itself so naturally in the midst of it all. This breath, just as it is—long or short, deep or shallow—no judgment, just a loving awareness.

From this place of stillness, you'll notice that among all the background waves, the attention will get pulled sometimes to a strong wave, a big wave. It could be a loud sound or a strong sensation in the body. Or it might be an emotion—sadness, frustration, longing, joy—or thoughts.

When you notice that a wave has pulled your attention from the breath, receive it. Let go of the attention to the breath and receive it with the same loving awareness, as if to bow to it gently. Name it: "Oh, sadness... sad, sad," or "excitement, excitement," or if it's a thought, "planning, planning" or "remembering, remembering," or "tingling" or "hot" in the body, or "cool." Feel this wave and name it gently.

Let it rise like a wave of the ocean. Be felt and known. And let it pass away in its own time. Then you can return to feel a few more breaths until another wave comes along.

You rest just here in the reality of the present—steady and calm, at ease. This breath, this wave of experience, received with loving awareness.

You are the loving awareness. You are the loving witness to it all. Steady and calm, allowing it to rise, be known, and in due season to pass away.

You rest in the timeless present, just here. Rest in loving awareness. It is who you are. You are awareness itself—the loving witness of all the waves of experience, all the dramas of human life and human incarnation.

Take your seat as the awakened one, as awareness itself, with love and compassion and an immense freedom.

Staying with this quiet, open-hearted presence, allow your eyes to open when you're ready. Sense that you can carry this ease, this loving awareness, as you open to the world around you.

CHAPTER 43

Embodied Presence Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 22 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners into a direct experience of embodied presence and loving awareness. The practice begins with settling into the body, taking one's seat "halfway between heaven and earth," and systematically releasing tension from the face, neck, shoulders, and belly. Kornfield emphasizes the felt sense of being held by gravity and the earth, establishing a foundation of stability and groundedness.*
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> *The meditation unfolds through layers of awareness: first attending to the body breathing itself, then recognizing how we "inter-breathe" with all living beings and the earth. From this embodied foundation, practitioners are invited to notice emotions arising like weather patterns and thoughts appearing like clouds—all held within a spacious, loving awareness that remains steady while phenomena rise and fall. This approach reflects the classic satipaṭṭhāna framework of mindfulness of body, feelings, and mind, while emphasizing the quality of loving awareness (mettā) as the container for all experience.*
>
> *Kornfield addresses the particular challenge of our busy modern culture, where silence and presence are rare. The invitation is to rest in a stillness that is bigger than passing thoughts and feelings—to become, in this very moment, "the Buddha" seated with a peaceful heart. This meditation offers both technique and immediate experience, making it accessible for newcomers while pointing experienced practitioners toward the natural awakening available in each present moment.*

If you would, let yourself find a way to settle, stable and comfortable. If it's easy, sit upright enough so there's a sense of both wakefulness but also graciousness. Like the king or queen on the throne, you take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. Allow your eyes to close gently.

The invitation of meditation is to come into the present, to quiet the mind, to open the heart, to find an embodied presence and loving awareness.

To begin, take two or three long breaths with a little bit of directed attention and relaxation. As we start, let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body, how your body pulled by gravity meets the earth, and the pressure of gravity and the earth together make a seat that is steady and dependable. Held by the earth, let your belly be soft and the breath natural. Let your heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now with this embodied presence, begin to simply notice with a mindful loving awareness the experiences here and now. Notice this body breathing itself. Feel how it inter-breathes with the rest of the earth, the air and the creatures, and all that breathes together. Relax as you feel the body breathe. Rest in the breathing. Let it calm and steady the body, heart, and mind.

As you sit with mindful loving awareness of this body breathing itself with the whole earth, you'll notice as well the arising of emotions and feelings like weather coming and going. You'll notice the thoughts and images of the mind, like clouds appearing—stories, pictures, memories, plans. Relax with it all and rest in mindful, loving awareness. Let things quiet and settle even as the feelings and thoughts rise and fall. You are the steady loving awareness, open and gracious.

We live in a busy culture, in a busy time, and there's not much room for silence, presence, listening. Rest just here in a stillness that's bigger than the thoughts and feelings that move through. A spacious loving awareness, quiet and present and kind.

Rest in a steady ease and presence. The body breathes with the earth and the waves of feelings and thoughts rise and fall. Underneath and around it all is a deep silence and stillness—a presence of loving awareness that notices it all as it rises and passes, and remains still and loving and present, just here and now.

If you like, you can put a half smile on your lips, the little half smile of a Buddha. Seated with a peaceful heart, steady, loving, present amidst it all, you become the Buddha. Take your seat of awakening just here and just now.

Just here. Quiet. Present. Amidst all things.

Now, when you're ready, allow your eyes to open gently and keep the sense of mindful presence as you do. For many of us, there are so few times when we just stop and let silence have its place. Listen. Presence.

CHAPTER 44

Monday Night Meditation & Dharma Talk with Jack Kornfield | Feb. 19, 2024

Jack Kornfield · 1h41

> *In this Monday night gathering, Jack Kornfield leads a 25-minute meditation focused on resting in mindful, loving awareness while observing the arising and passing of all experience. The guided practice emphasizes noticing the beginnings and endings of breath, thoughts, and sensations, recognizing that awareness itself is our true home.*
>
> *The teaching explores the mystery of consciousness and incarnation, drawing on poetry from Pablo Neruda, Mary Oliver, and Thich Nhat Hanh to illuminate how spirit takes form in the body. Jack shares Thomas Merton's profound encounter with Buddhist statues in Sri Lanka, where he recognized that "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." The talk emphasizes that wisdom is not something to be gained through spiritual development, but rather remembered—as Korean Zen master Seung Sahn would tell students, "You already understand."*
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> *Jack weaves together teachings on the Four Noble Truths, impermanence (anicca), and the nature of suffering (dukkha) with personal stories, including his mother's death and his time as a "Druid Reformed" in the Army. He addresses our current global challenges through Joanna Macy's vision of "the great turning" toward a life-sustaining civilization, encouraging practitioners to trust their innate wisdom and live from loving awareness. The evening concludes with community dialogue where participants share their own experiences of awakening, trust, and the dropping away of fear.*

We have sat virtually, we sat on the land, we've come together. We've had all kinds of adventures actually, which I could tell you about at times. We've had the Tibetan Gyuto tantric choir come and sing to us. We've had amazing teachers come through. And here we are as a community practicing together.

What we do on Monday night is really very simple. We sit in meditation for twenty-five minutes or so with a little bit of guidance, a reminder. Then we take a break, five minutes or so to stretch and relax. And then there's teachings, and on occasion, as there will be tonight, dialogue and question and response afterward.

So I invite you to find a way to sit, to begin our meditation practice together. Find a steady, simple, grounded posture in whatever way you can. If you're sitting in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. A cushion, whatever allows you to feel really connected—your body to the seat beneath you and all the way down into the earth. A steadiness.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently, or keep them mostly downcast if that's better for you. Take a couple of long breaths. Let your body begin to settle. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, roll your head in a little circle to let it find a simple upright. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Again, feel the weight of your body, gravity, and how the earth completely supports you when you let go into your seat. You're met by the strength and steadiness of the earth itself. You can rest on her. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the play of human experience moment by moment. As you relax and rest in a mindful, loving awareness, notice how the breath breathes itself. You might feel it as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it helps, you could put your hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall in the palm of your hand. With each breath, invite a sense of ease and calm. Ease. Calm. Whispered. You relax in mindful loving awareness. Let the mind quiet and let the attention be present and kind.

Begin to notice the beginnings and endings of experience. Everything rises and falls away. As you feel each breath, notice without struggle, in whatever relaxed way you can, either the beginning or the ending of a breath. The space between breaths. The next beginning. Notice how the breath arises, is felt, and then dissolves. The rising and passing away of experience. Let it have its own rhythms—rising, appearing, experienced, and then passing away.

You are the mindful, loving awareness that notices gently the beginning, the middle, the end of the breath, and the next breath.

As you notice the beginning and the ending of the breath, resting in mindful, loving awareness, you can also notice the moments when attention is pulled from the breath to a sound or a thought, to an emotion or an image. Notice how these too have a beginning and an end. There's a thought, a picture, words. You notice it. You relax, let it dissolve. It ends. Then you go back to the breath, the next beginning. Or maybe there's an emotion and you notice that. Feel it. And then after a time you turn away and that ends.

Images, emotions, sensations—they all are in change. They arise like clouds in the sky or waves.

You don't have to do anything about them. You don't have to follow all the waves like at the edge of the ocean, watching each wave carefully. Relax. Rest in loving awareness and simply notice how everything appears for a little while and then vanishes. It's all made up of ever-changing experience and vibrations appearing for a moment or a time and then gone. And you are the mindful, loving awareness—gracious and easy. You are the mindful loving awareness, consciousness itself.

The breath begins and ends, rises and falls. And the waves of experience appear around the breath, and each of them is made of lots of little waves. The sensations in the body have lots of vibrations inside them. The thoughts and images have lots of pixelated parts—colors, words, and ideas. The sounds have a field of changing vibration on the ear. And you rest in the stillness of the present and let the field of change, like the waves of the ocean, rise and pass.

Relax into awareness. Trust it. It is your home. You are the gracious awareness that notices the arising and passing, the waves of the ocean of experience. And you are the silent, vast consciousness that notices. You are the loving awareness. Rest in it. Trust it. Relax into it. Letting the mind quiet, the breath settle with ease and calm. Let the heart soften and rest in kind attention.

One more minute. Relax into loving awareness—spacious, kind.

And when you're ready, let your eyes open gently and keep the same spirit of kind attention, presence.

Welcome back. I'd like to teach tonight, but first I'd like to invite you to relax, to listen in a way that is meditative and contemplative. It's not something you need to take notes about, and there's no quiz at the end. It's really a reminder of things that you already know. So let that which reminds you or touches your heart in some way come in, and if it's not useful, just let it go.

I've recently returned from travel teaching in Costa Rica. I was there with my beloved Trudy, who got quite sick. She'd actually had an infection in California, and it got much worse there. She ended up being hospitalized, and now she's a lot better. It feels really good to be back home in our own place, in our own bed.

And it's mysterious, you know, getting on an airplane—those metal tubes with a kind of thin aluminum wall. And there we are at 38,000 feet. All of a sudden you're in a different continent. It's extraordinary. And then I come back and look at this culture after having been away for a month or a month and a half, trying to make sense of the way people move here, which is different than what was true in Costa Rica.

Who are we? Who are you that gets to travel in this really miraculous way?

There's an even bigger mystery beside airplanes and global travel. Who are we? We get lost in our phones—you know how that happens—and our to-do lists. But what about if you look up at the night sky? What about if you look at the mystery of a single tree or flower?

The mystery is amazing because it's us that's amazing. We are beings of spirit, we are beings of consciousness. Spirit came into your body to be born in this incarnation, and it will leave it when you die.

Mary Oliver writes, "The spirit likes to dress up like this—ten fingers, ten toes, shoulders and all the rest. It could float, of course, but would rather plumb rough matter. An airy and shapeless thing, it needs the metaphor of the body."

So consciousness comes into this human body. And as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "This body is not me. I am life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Since before death and before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds." Birth and death are a game of hide and seek—pretending we're separate, that we're not connected, that we're not the field of life itself expressing itself in some new, unique way in your incarnations.

I love this extraordinary poem by Pablo Neruda, certainly one of the greatest poets of the last century. He writes about his awakening to poetry: "And it was at that age, poetry arrived in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where it came from—from winter or a river. I don't know how or when. No, they were not voices, they were not words, not silence, but from a street I was summoned. From the branches of night, abruptly from the others, among violent fires or returning alone, there I was without a face and it touched me. I did not know what to say. My mouth had no way with names. My eyes were blind and something started in my soul—fever or forgotten wings. And I made my own way deciphering that fire. And I wrote the first faint line, faint without substance, pure nonsense, pure wisdom of someone who knows nothing." It's a mystery. "I felt myself a pure part of the abyss. I wheeled with the stars. My heart broke free on the open sky."

I start with a poem when we're talking about mystery because, as another great poet said, you can't get the news from poetry, but men and women die every day from lack of what is found there—from that heart-soul connection to mystery.

"Oh, nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are—the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, of the great lineage of those who've awakened. And look around at this mystery.

Rachel Carson, the great environmentalist, said, "If I had influence with the good fairy who's supposed to preside over the birth of all children, I should ask her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible it would last throughout their life."

This is really the purpose of meditation more than anything. Yes, we can quiet the mind, we can calm ourselves, we can de-stress, we can see in new ways. But it invites more than that. It invites a sense of wonder and mystery, and with it, a sense of love.

When Thomas Merton was traveling in Asia, he writes in *Asian Journal* about visiting the great monastery in Sri Lanka where an entire cliff was carved with huge statues of the Buddha and Ananda. He said he stood there on the grass barefoot, observing the extraordinary faces, the great smiles—huge and subtle, filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing. The peace not of emotional resignation, but the stillness that is seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone, without refutation, without any argument. The thing is, when you see in this way, there's no puzzle, no problem. All the problems are resolved and clear because you see that what matters is: everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

He said that was the most moving work of art he had ever seen—to see the eyes, even out of stone, of the Buddha saying it's all empty and it all matters: the great heart of compassion and loving awareness.

Meditation in the end is not about gaining something or attaining something. Instead, we can see the world with the heart of wisdom. Seung Sahn, the Korean Zen master with whom I practiced, used to respond at certain moments when people would ask—and this was the 1970s, when everybody wanted to get enlightened—"How about this? And how about that?"

And sometimes he would pause and look back at people and say, "You already understand." It was a beautiful moment. "You already understand. This is the mystery. You already know." And it was tremendously empowering to hear it. It was a reminder to us.

Now, of course, the whole spiritual industry—of which I'm a card-carrying member and part of—has an entire wing devoted to the development of patience and loving-kindness and calm and steadiness and equanimity, and all of the qualities and ethics and so forth. The idea that if you develop and develop, then you get to be this magnificent being, maybe in this lifetime or sometime. But the spiritual industry based on development, which is not a bad thing—I mean, I've done it and it's helped me in some ways—it's not quite the real deal. It's sort of flirting with the reality, but it's not the real deal.

I was in Western Massachusetts some years ago, and one of the most beloved healers, a physician in that community, died. Because they were part of a whole spiritual complex in Western Massachusetts of many practitioners and practices, they did the kind of things that you might do. They got the Tibetan lama to come and chant, and they did forty-nine days of practice, and they did visualizations, and they bathed his body and did all this.

And then his widow, his wife, wanted to know what happened to him. So she went first to a wonderful Sufi master that they'd practiced with and said, "Do you have any sense of what's happened to him?" The master closed his eyes and said, "Yes, I've been tracking him. He's now in this Sufi heaven." And he described this place with the saints. "He was such a saintly soul." And she was really kind of consoled by it and helped.

Then she ran into the Tibetan lama who'd helped, and said, "I've been wondering how he's doing." The Tibetan lama said, "Oh yes, I've been tracking him through the bardo, and he's now in this particular bardo, and this is where his consciousness is, and he's moving from one to another." She nodded and thought, "Hmm, that's a little different, but maybe so."

Then a little while later, in the next days, she went and spent some time with this amazing Hindu guru that they'd also practiced with. And he said, "Oh, I've been meditating and connecting with your husband. He's already in the womb of a woman in Washington, D.C. He's ready to take his next birth."

She listened and thought to herself, "Whoa, here are the experts telling me all these different things." So she made a mistake and came to visit me. And I thought, "Well, she's going to ask me where is he, what do I think?" And even though I'm foolish, I'm maybe not that foolish—or maybe I am—but anyway, I said, "I need to ask you a question. Here's the great Sufi master and the Hindu guru and the Tibetan lama, and they're all telling you something different. And you're in this state of confusion. You don't know

who to believe. What is it," I asked her, "that you know? That nobody could tell you anything different because you know it so deeply. What are the things you actually know? You may not know where he is, but what is the deepest knowing you have?"

She began to get quiet and answer. She said, "Well, the things I know that no one could tell me different: everything changes. Everything. Everything that appears or arises eventually disappears. Everything that's born dies. It's all impermanence, it's all in change."

I nodded. "Yes. What else do you know?"

She said, "Well, I've learned that if I hold on to what changes, I'll struggle. And if I let it come and go as it does, life is easier. I've also learned that I can't stop pleasure and pain, praise and blame, gain and loss—they all keep coming no matter what I try to do."

I nodded yes.

And she noticed a couple of other truths. She said, "When I get all lost in it, I suffer a lot. When I relax and come back to my practice of mindfulness and loving-kindness, it all goes easier."

Take a breath. Let yourself get quiet. What do you know? No matter what the lamas and mamas and swamis and gurus might say or not—what are the things in the deepest way that you know about this human incarnation? You already understand.

When I do dialogue with people, and sometimes I do at the end of these Monday classes, people ask me a question. It used to be when I was a younger teacher, I had all kinds of answers. I still do. I don't think that pleases my wife terribly much, but there they are. But I don't tend to answer right away, not so much anymore. Instead I'll say, "Let's breathe together. Now that question or problem you have—what makes you ask?"

And then all of a sudden the whole thing will unfold, because they asked me about karma. I could go on and on about karma. But instead, they'll say, "Well, my sister just died." Or, "My cousin won the lottery." Or, "I have this good friend in Europe who's decided to go and volunteer in Ukraine." And all of a sudden, instead of an abstract question, it comes from the heart.

And then I might ask, "Where do you feel the dilemma or the question in your body? And how do you touch it—with kindness or fear, with curiosity or trust?" Not that you should, but what's actually happening? And then when they notice, they relax often. Maybe I can touch it with kindness, this question, this dilemma. Surprising what cool answers come back.

And then I might turn to the group and say, "What have others learned about this kind of dilemma or question?" And all kinds of other wisdom appears. Or I might ask, "What would your wisest self do in this circumstance? Or what would your most compassionate self do or say?" And they get quiet and begin to trust.

It takes some practice. If you're young, you might not trust your instinct and wisdom and intuition. "Should I get divorced or not?" Sometimes the knowing will come and sometimes it won't, because it's not yet time for you to know. But in time, you will know.

Take a moment to reflect. What is a big question for you in your life? And what would the wisest and most compassionate part of yourself say in response? You can know.

Now the beautiful thing is that wisdom is gracious. As it says in the Tao, "If you don't remember the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. But when you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and even when death comes, you are at ease."

That's an amazing thing, to have that ease and graciousness. That's the place of wisdom. Wisdom is actually playful.

Here's a story. In 1969, right out of graduate school, I was drafted into the U.S. Army. I got new clothing, a haircut, vaccinations. I filled out a stack of forms. One asked for my religion. Feeling rebellious, I decided to choose a new religion for myself.

I wrote "Druid, parentheses, reformed." Two weeks later, I received my dog tag stamped with my name, social security number, blood type, and "Druid Reformed." I wonder how the army would administer last rites for that.

Stationed stateside for several months before shipping out, I was looking forward to a big special weekend—a night and a date—when the commanding officer suddenly canceled all weekend leaves. A large anti-war protest was scheduled, and he feared many soldiers would join in. I was determined to go out that weekend with my girl. Discovering there was to be a full moon, I requested a two-day pass to celebrate a religious holiday.

The commanding officer was skeptical. "What the hell religion are you?" I told him I was a Druid, and the last full moon before the winter solstice was our high holy day. He demanded to see my dog tags, so I showed them to him. He looked at them in stunned silence for a moment, then granted me a pass. As I was on my way out, he said, "Wait a second—don't you guys kill goats?" "No, sir," I said. "That's the Orthodox. I'm Reformed."

Wisdom is playful. It is. And here's the Taoist saying: even in death.

When my mother was dying—and my mother was a really loving heart, a loving being. My father was a violent, difficult figure in my life, but my mother was very loving. She was approaching ninety and had lost a lot of her memory. She was in care and then hospice, but she knew who her family members were. She was somewhat oriented to where she was.

In the last days, the four of us—my three brothers and I—were gathered around her, a couple of days before she died. She was there in her bed. She had said that one of the things she was sorry about, knowing she was facing death, was that human beings were going to travel to other planets. They were going to go to Mars and other places. She wished she could be around for it.

So there she was, lying back, kind of out of it. My twin brother—he died a few years ago, my beloved twin—he had no shame about anything. He was a kind person, but he actually didn't care what anybody thought. He just did what he liked, which I admired greatly because I couldn't quite do it.

She's lying there, and we're gathered around for this solemn thing, and he grabs her bed and says, "Mom! You know, you're getting near now. It's almost time to go to Mars!" And he starts shaking her bed. Her head is lolling back and forth. "The rocket's taking off, Mom! The rocket's taking off! You're going to Mars! You're going to Mars!" "Oh, I am! I am!"

He shook her for a while. We're all cracking up. The hospice staff thinks we've just lost it—which we have, actually. We couldn't stop laughing. Finally she settles back, and he says, "Mom, you had a trip to Mars." And she smiles a little bit.

The Tao says even when death comes, you can be gracious. It's not such a big deal, it turns out. You can be amused at all of it. This is part of wisdom—not taking it all that seriously.

Now you say, "Wait. We're in tough times. The world is really suffering. Climate change, racism, warfare, divisiveness, dangerous technologies, increasing conflict."

Oh nobly born, my friends—you humans on this planet—remember the Four Noble Truths. Suffering, the First Noble Truth, is not the end of the story. There is suffering, and it's caused by greed and hate and ignorance and fear. But there is also a path for human beings to the end of suffering.

And you know it and we know it.

Joanna Macy, the great and wise systems theorist and wonderful Buddhist teacher, talks about this time as what she calls "the great turning"—a name for the most essential adventure of human beings for a very long time: the shift from industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization. The ecological and social crises we face are caused by an economic system depending on accelerating growth, its performance measured by how fast materials can be extracted from the earth and turned into consumer products, weapons, and waste. Increasingly, a revolution is underway. People are realizing that our needs can be met without destroying the world. We have the technical knowledge, the communication tools, and the material resources to grow enough food, ensure clean air and water, and meet rational energy needs. Future generations will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society, and they may well call this the time of the great turning. You are invited to be a part of it, even now.

That's one of the most hopeful things you can imagine—that we're being pushed. You know how we human beings are. We're being pushed and pressured and pressed into realizing our interdependence, into realizing that we can't continue to live the way we have, and that there has to be a different consciousness. And part of your task as the wise one is not to get lost in despair or fear, although those arise.

But as Howard Zinn writes, to be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It's based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—so many of them—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and the possibility, the moral possibility of sending this world in a new and extraordinary direction.

Your wisdom heart knows that we belong to each other. That sense of separation is a fiction. As Archbishop Tutu said, in Africa when you ask someone, "How are you?" the reply is almost always in the plural. Even if you're speaking to one person, a man would say, "We are well," or "We are not well." He himself might be quite well, but his grandmother is not well, and so he is not well either. The solitary, isolated human being is really a fiction. We know this so deeply in ourselves.

With every breath, when Ajahn Chah said, "You already understand"—you do.

My daughter, when she was in third or fourth grade, lettered for me this page. It's a paragraph from Chief Seattle in her elementary school handwriting, which I cherish: "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great

loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man." We could say women, humans. She gave it to me and said, "Here, Daddy, I think you can use this in your talk." And I cherish it.

But we know this. We know with every breath. We know that in many cultures, people greet each other as relatives. Yes, there is Grandpa Joe, our president. And Grandmother Kamala. And that weird Uncle Donald. You know, they're all members of our family. All of them. Sisters and brothers, aunties. We know this.

But we also forget. And this is part of the mystery. Just as there's remembering, there's forgetting—the illusion of forgetting. And our culture does it really well. Modern consumer culture is an inoculation against the misery.

Get things, buy things, have a new future—all of this. John Gatto, the New York City Teacher of the Year, wrote: "Think of the things that are killing us as a nation: drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all—lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as philosophy."

And you hear this, and we tune out. We forget who we are. We forget the mystery. We forget the capacity of the heart. We get lost.

John invited his mother over for dinner. During the meal, his mother couldn't help but notice how beautiful John's roommate was. She'd long been suspicious of a relationship between John and his roommate, and her curiosity only grew. At some point, her son volunteered, "I know what you might be thinking, mom, but I assure you that Carrie and I are just roommates."

A week later, Carrie came to John and said, "Ever since your mother came to dinner, I've been unable to find that beautiful silver gravy ladle we used when we made that nice meal for her. You don't suppose she did something with it, do you?"

He said, "Well, I'll write her an email." Dear mother, I'm not saying you did take the gravy ladle or move it somehow, or didn't, but mysteriously it's been missing ever since you were here for dinner.

She sent a message back which read: Dear son, I'm not saying you do sleep with Carrie, and I'm not saying you don't. But the fact remains that if she was sleeping in her own bed, she would have found the gravy ladle by now. Love, your mother.

The story is entitled "Don't Lie to Your Mother." Don't lie to yourself. You know?

Ruth Dennison was asked if she could explain karma. She said, "Karma means you don't get away with nothing. Because there's always somebody watching, and you know who that is." As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi."

We're the ones that see and know. But with loving awareness, with the very practice at the heart of what we do—mindfulness and loving awareness—we also discover that awareness is big enough to hold it all. The ten thousand tears and joys and sorrows. The heart is big enough to hold it all. And the purpose of meditation isn't some grim duty to make yourself somehow a better person. I know you've got your therapy, you go to the gym, you work out—but it's not really about that.

It's about the presence of the loving heart and the wisdom that opens to this mystery, and how we navigate it. And you already understand.

When my teacher Ajahn Chah went to visit the most famous master of his time, Ajahn Mun, he described all the experiences of his meditations, wanting to get guidance—dissolving himself into light, having bliss, seeing the suffering of the world, all the things one can see. And Ajahn Mun said, "Well, that's good enough, Chah, but you've missed the point."

Ajahn Chah said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Those are just experiences. They're like movies on a screen. There's a romantic comedy and a war movie and a documentary and so forth. All those experiences come and go. The only question is: to whom do they happen? Turn your attention back to awareness itself and become the one who knows. Become the knowing."

Ram Dass describes this as "I am loving awareness." That's his phrase. When you shift from the experience to become the mindful loving awareness itself—and because the two are wedded together—here's a poem from Zen master Issa, the great haiku poet, one of Japan's most beloved poets of all time. He writes: "Dew evaporates and all our world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting."

I'll recite it again now with context. He wrote this poem when his young daughter died. And he loved her. And he said: dew evaporates and all our life is dew. So dear, so refreshing, and so fleeting.

Suzuki Roshi said, "When you realize the fact that everything changes—everything—and find your composure in the midst of it, there you find yourself in Nirvana."

So the wise heart is filled with tenderness and compassion, like Isa. And it views the world—birth and death, joy and sorrow, so much of it—with kindly eyes.

Take a pause for a moment and ask yourself: what's asking to be viewed with kindly eyes in your life and in this world? And when you quiet and listen, you know. You already understand.

Central casting has put you in this particular weird body that you have, in the weird family and weird culture in which you were born. What an amazing thing for this ride, this hide and seek that Thich Nhat Hanh described. Central casting put you there and put all the characters around you so you would have a really rich human experience, with the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows. And with a trillion creatures living in your body, you're a galaxy for all these little viruses and bacteria and amazing things that live inside you—and gain and loss and pleasure and pain. Here you are, you get the whole drama. Central casting says, here, try this life. See what it's like.

And then you think, well, I want it just to be pure and beautiful. Alexander Solzhenitsyn—and I think of him because he was in the same prison system where Navalny was just killed—he was one of the great Russian poets and authors who also got thrown into the Siberian prisons. And yet from there he wrote: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our own heart?"

So here you are, asking that deep question. What needs to be seen with kindly eyes? Even the horrible and the terrible. Or maybe it's your own aging. You look at your body and go, whoa. Because I've been talking to my colleagues and friends—we're all headed toward eighty. In a couple of months, my beloved dharma teacher partner Joseph Goldstein turns eighty. Jon Kabat-Zinn turns eighty. Trudy and I turned seventy-nine. Something's happening here.

And I think of the retreats I used to teach with Stephen Levine, dear friend and a wise person who wrote so much about these subjects—*Healing into Life and Death*, *Who Dies*, and so forth. We'd be teaching together and people would talk about what they've been through and what they're going through. And he would pause, and he would look with such kindness, and he'd say, "Big surprise. Big surprise." Oh, there's death happening—big surprise. There's birth happening—big surprise. There's gain and loss and pleasure and pain, all of it.

And as you get quiet, and as you listen to what you really know, there comes a kind of trust. A trust in your intuition. Ruth Dennison, colleague and dharma teacher who died a few years ago—she had a ticket to get on one of those airplanes on 9/11, the one that crashed into the field, the one that was going to crash into the Pentagon but

crashed in Pennsylvania. She was going toward the gate and she said, "Uh-uh, I don't think I should get on this plane." Something in you knows, often, if you quiet and listen. If you learn to trust, you can see deeply. You can live from a place of understanding.

And trust, it turns out, in the great Zen texts—trust is really another word for liberation. Liberation, it says, is one with a trusting heart. To trust that the heart is big enough to hold it all, that you can navigate it all, birth and death when it comes.

Mary Oliver explains it this way: "To live in this life, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones as if your life depends upon it, and when the time comes to let it go—to let it go."

Three lines of wisdom: to love, and to let go.

In this whole world, it's like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo or a rainbow, a dance, a dream. What happened to your childhood? Terrible, beautiful, whatever it was. Hey baby, it's back with the pyramids and the dinosaurs. It's back into the void, and a new day appears. As Maya Angelou says, "It's a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before." It keeps coming back.

And it's not that happiness makes us grateful, but that the wisdom heart and its gratitude makes us happy. This is what we really know. The path to happiness is not one of possession. Socrates used to love going to the markets, he said, to see all the things that he was happy not having. He just enjoyed the dance of it all. This is wise understanding.

The path to happiness is recognizing that you can't possess anything, even your own body. What you are is free to love it—you can love. And living, you can live as a wise being just where you are. It's never too late. Oh, nobly born.

Then you become grateful for it all. What an amazing thing to have this life. And what an invitation of awakening. Oh, nobly born. Remember that there's a freedom in you, a humor and a perspective and a vast love that no one can take from you. It's who you really are.

I remember teaching with Stephen Levine. I really loved him, and we had many good years of friendship. Sometimes toward the end of his retreats, especially when he was working with people who had experienced loss and were struggling in different ways, he would say, "If you only had one more day to live, who would you call? And what would you say? And why are you waiting?"

So we come together to quiet the mind, to open the heart. To remember that you are the Buddha. You are the wise one. You already understand. Trust this. Live in the vast love and spacious awareness. That's who you really are.

It's never too late to be the wise one, the loving one. It's who you really are.

It's been very deep for me. I cry every day, and I just really want this to stop. I just wanted to hear from you and see.

I want it to stop too. And I'm absolutely sure that a ceasefire is absolutely necessary, and it's awful. So that's the first thing. Yeah, absolutely. And I have been, and will probably go back out on the street wearing my own keffiyeh, as you are. And I've done it in Hebron, and in Ramallah, in peace walks with my friends and peacemakers from all sides—the Druze and the Arabs and the Christians and the Muslims. So I feel, also like you, not just brokenhearted, but appalled by what's happening. And I thank you for lifting it up for us.

Thank you. Yeah.

Ernest?

Yes, hello, Jack.

Hi, Ernie.

I don't have much of a question, but I wanted to share some of my story. Please keep it very short, because it goes along with what you were talking about at the beginning—about the mystery. The way my life has unfolded is that all the big changes in my life just came to me.

I became a psychotherapist. I was in the process of ending a relationship. I'd been in a workshop with the therapist I was seeing. And as I was walking home—I was in Davis, California, you walk home there—all of a sudden, walking down the street, I can still see the image of where I was, and I knew: I wanted to do what Paul does, as a therapist. So I wound up dropping out of school, and I had nothing to do with it. The universe just came along and said, "Do this." And I wound up doing it.

So many other things came along just that way—it all unfolded. I got into dharma practice because I was seeing Robert Hall, the therapist, back in the seventies, and he told me to go see Dhiravamsa. I didn't know what it was all about. I spent a weekend with Dhiravamsa, and an hour into his talk on Friday night, I knew. There was just this opening, and it all happened.

I've been involved with Hameed in the Diamond Approach since the early nineties, and how I got into that was exactly the same way. I was also going through a relationship ending, and I got a flyer in the mail. I'd seen Hameed a couple of years before and had a kind of nice feeling about him. The flyer arrived saying, "Here's the Diamond Heart," and it was just a knowing. It just emerged—yes, this is what I need to do.

I could go on with other kinds of things as well, but I just wanted to reassure everybody that it's possible to live a life that just comes out. And I can say this now, after many years—I'm older than you are at this point—looking back, I can see that that's what was happening at the time. It was just, "Oh, this is what's going on." I wasn't aware of these miracles that were just emerging. So I don't have a question. I just wanted to share that.

Beautiful. You're passing along that if you pay attention and trust, things will come. It wants to unfold. It wants to. Yeah, that's beautiful. Thank you, Bernie.

When you said, "Okay, what do you know that's actually true?"—I know the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, but what came to me is that what I really know is true is that the universe is unfolding exactly the way it's supposed to unfold. Which is the same thing, a little different way. So yeah, thank you.

Thank you. And just a little story for those who are listening: Sharon Salzberg, when she was I don't know, seventeen or eighteen, just a relatively young student at the University of Buffalo, got a scholarship to go study in India. A great Tibetan Lama was visiting. She went to his lecture and raised her hand and said, "I'm about to go to India. Are there some teachers or places that you recommend I should go?" And the Lama looked back at her kindly and said, "Best to follow the pretense of accident." A kind of brilliant answer.

And in fact, she went to India, not knowing what awaited her, ran into people who said, "Here, try this." Very quickly, she met both great meditation teachers like Goenka and Anagarika Munindra, and colleagues like Joseph Goldstein and others. It all unfolded, as Ernie is saying, in its own way—the pretense of accidents.

Susie, it's good to see you.

"I had what I can only call a spiritual awakening. I moved to San Diego, and to put things in context—I have a very healthy heart, but the timing belt was wrong. They put all these pieces in me, so I'm kind of bionic today. And I have never felt more grateful, more awake, more alive.

The awakening was when I noticed that fear had dropped away. The fear I had been dragging, dragging all my life. I remember someone asking, 'How long is it going to take to get over this?' And you said, 'Oh, ten years.' And here I am at seventy-eight going, 'Aha!' It's so amazing to just know when it drops away and you're free. I'm free. It just feels like I'm part of everything."

Was there some moment that this happened, or did it just sort of unfold?

"It just kind of—I started noticing that I wasn't afraid to speak to people anymore. I felt comfortable outside of the house. Now that my heart was all better, I could do anything. I had enough energy. I noticed that I was doing everything instead of doing nothing. My partner said, 'Look at you.' People kept saying, 'Look at you, look what's happened.' And I went, 'I look at me and I know'—I didn't say this out loud—'I know I'm not afraid of anybody.'"

Gorgeous. What a great rebirth. Hallelujah.

Let me ask you something. If you would close your eyes for a moment and tune into the joy in your rebirth, the sense of fearlessness—if your heart had a message for everybody else who's here, who's listening, what would it say?

"Be grateful. Be grateful no matter what it is. Be grateful. And live and experience the moment."

It just is what it is. We are what we are. And everything passes. Everything changes. Be grateful.

Gratitude is so powerful—it really is. Gratefulness brings happiness.

That was beautiful wisdom and a beautiful experience to share.

Maybe there's one more raised hand? We have one more.

Hi, Jack.

Oh, heavens, how great! Really good to see you.

Good to see you too. As I've been sitting here enjoying this, I remembered a story, so I'll tell you a short story if that's okay.

Yes.

I'm a retired Teamster. I attended no fancy university—well, actually, I attempted twice, but it turned out they wanted you to go to class. So I was driving for a number of years across the country for UPS, pulling a double trailer through the Rocky Mountains. Early in that job, I found myself in blizzard conditions coming across the pass in Wyoming. You could see about maybe fifteen or twenty feet in front of the truck. You couldn't really tell where the edges of the road were. And it was night. I became rather tense.

But I had a kind of secret weapon. There's this thing called Dharma Seed—I heard of this—and there's this guy on there with a gentle, calm voice. So I put the plugs in my ears. They had wires in those days. And I listened to you talk. And I drove.

Somewhere in the talk, you said something about weather. You said, "Whatever the weather is, wonderful or awful, the weather will change." As I crested the top of the Rocky Mountains and started to go down the other side, the sun and the time moved on. I'm going fifteen or twenty miles an hour. The snow began to lighten. And the sun came out and everything was wonderful.

Then about ten miles further, the clouds closed in and it started snowing like heck again. But now I knew—the weather will change.

Just don't hold the wheel too tight, and don't make sudden changes in direction.

So that's my little story for tonight.

Part of what I'm loving this evening—you know, sometimes we have dialogue and people talk about their struggles, their family, their work. But tonight there's been this garden of wisdom emerging. Your experience in the truck—we were all there with you, going ten miles an hour in the snowstorm. Or the beautiful experience from Susie of not being afraid anymore. Or the wisdom from Ernie about the world just unfolding as it does and trusting it.

This is really sweet. We're hearing the voices of wisdom from the community, from the people around us. It makes me really believe what Sant Anim said: you already understand. You do. And it's beautiful.

So let's take a couple of minutes just to be quiet and feel our connection with one another in the silence. Feel how much the world is blessed when we bring a peaceful and trusting heart to this complicated life. Feel how we can trust ourselves, our deep knowing—the one who knows.

*

Thank you all. A pleasure, as usual, to see you. Bon voyage. Good evening, good morning, wherever you are. Send your love—a little bit of mettā for everybody you see on the screen.

What a treat to share and to hear the sweet wisdom of those who spoke tonight.

Be well. Stay safe. Stay dry. Stay well.

It's just weather. Sometimes it's just between your ears—and that is the worst storm of all.

Yes. And it passes.

CHAPTER 45

The Garden of the Heart

Jack Kornfield · 1h46

> *In this springtime teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together the imagery of gardening with the Buddha's own agricultural metaphors to illuminate the path of awakening. Drawing from an early sutta where the Buddha describes himself as a plowman—with faith as the seed, mindfulness as the plow blade, and wise effort as the oxen—Kornfield explores how we cultivate the garden of the heart through patient, loving attention.*
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> *The talk addresses the ancient debate between sudden and gradual awakening, suggesting that we are always already here in the present moment, yet there remains work to be done. Kornfield discusses how obstacles inevitably arise in any endeavor—whether meditation, parenting, relationships, or social change—and how these difficulties become opportunities for deeper learning. He emphasizes the importance of watering wholesome seeds of kindness, forgiveness, and compassion rather than seeds of anger and fear, referencing Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching on consciousness as a field of seeds.*
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> *Through stories ranging from prison garden projects to shopping carts in the rain, Kornfield illustrates how we can shift from the 'body of fear' to living as loving awareness itself. The teaching culminates in a profound invitation: pretend you're enlightened. By imagining ourselves as spacious, gracious Buddhas seeing the world with eyes of compassion, we remember our true nature as consciousness itself—playing hide and seek in human form. The talk includes a guided meditation on trust, the body's natural healing, and becoming the loving witness of life's constant renewal.*

Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Ileana. I'm very happy to see you all and to be back here in the springtime, at least northern hemisphere spring, and pleased to be able to join you.

This Monday Night Sitting group, for those who are new tonight or attending, has been ongoing now for 39 years. Most of it took place on the beautiful land in Woodacre Valley, San Geronimo Valley at Spirit Rock. I taught Monday night for close to 30 years, once a week. Now I teach it once a month and other people come in. But I really love being able to see your faces on the little squares here because many of you I know well over time. I certainly miss seeing people in person, but this is what we have, so we work with what we got.

What we do on Monday night is really pretty simple. We'll start with some meditation, guided a bit and some silence. Following that, there'll be five minutes or so to stretch and relax, and that's followed by some teachings, as it will be tonight, and then some dialogue with folks.

Busy life, busy world. Let's invite the sense of presence and come into our meditation time.

Find a way to sit that is comfortable and gracious for your body. There's enough suffering in life without actually adding to it from your meditation. Find it comfortable and stable. Let yourself settle. Settle in your place this moment where you are on this earth. And if you're comfortable doing so, let your eyes close gently.

Just begin to tune in. Take two long breaths and let them be an invitation for body and heart and mind to come into the present, to open and soften and make space.

As you tune in with mindful, loving attention to this moment, start with awareness of your body. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a little circle if you wish to release your neck and let it find a simple upright. Relax the shoulders and let the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body, how gravity pulls you down to the seat, the chair, your feet, your buttocks into the earth, and feel that solidity, how your body is completely supported just where you are.

Relax. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Here you take your seat in this human form, halfway between heaven and earth, with a loving awareness just now. You could say meditation is an act of love, of bringing loving attention to life right here and now.

As you do, let yourself open to the spirit of trust. The way you can sense this most easily is to bring your awareness to the rhythm of your breath. Notice how it breathes itself. You don't have to do anything. It comes in, the chest and belly rise and fall, goes out like the waves of the ocean. You can trust the breath breathing itself. Feel the breath just as it is—deep or shallow, doesn't matter. Let it breathe how it wants, and receive it as an act of trust.

If it's helpful, you can sense yourself breathing in the ocean of air that you exchange, that every breath brings in fresh new oxygen and air to your body and you breathe out carbon dioxide. You inter-breathe with the trees around you, who drink up the CO2 and breathe out oxygen in return.

And the breath breathes itself with the krill in the ocean and the lemurs in the forests of Madagascar, and the teenagers out on their first date—they're all breathing with you. And you can trust this because you're resting in the breath of the earth that breathes you in all things. Relax into it. Trust in the rhythm of the breath. Gracious and easy. You are breathed by the earth. Trust it.

If you like, you can put a half smile on your lips. You become the Buddha seated under your own tree of enlightenment, sensing the rhythm of life. You take your seat in the midst of it all.

And as the breath breathes itself, invite the mind to quiet and the heart to soften. A sense of benevolent presence, a mindful loving presence, to receive whatever is here with kindness.

And as you breathe, as the breath breathes itself, you can also sense with this trust how the body heals itself. You don't have to breathe the breath. And similarly, every twenty-four hours, one hundred billion new red blood cells are born in your body, renewing your blood, just now. And if you scratch yourself or you fall and break a bone, if you sit quietly, the bones begin to heal. The scratch covers over and the body heals itself. Just as the breath breathes itself, this body too tends and heals itself. Rest in this trust. Feel the endless creativity of renewal, breath by breath, in the whole of your body. Loving awareness and trust, allowing the rhythms of life to renew again with each breath and each moment.

And just as the breath breathes itself so naturally, and the body renews itself and heals itself, so too the heart heals itself. There are times of loss and grief, of pain—but they're not the end of the story. There are all the emotions of longing and love and fear and joy that the heart opens to, and even in the great pains of life, in its own season, the heart finds its way to mend and hold them. Not pushing them away or denying, but as a field of loving awareness, allowing the cycles of loss and gain and pleasure and pain, all the movements of the heart, like the breath, to come, to be known, and in their time to come to a resolution in love. To be healed.

Stay simple and present with the breathing of life. Rest in mindful, loving awareness just now.

And as you feel the breath inter-breathing with all things, the recreation of the breath, one breath at a time, renewing—and the body which renews itself, which heals, which renews—and the heart which heals itself—you can feel the trust. Your attention is an act of love, noticing this creative recreation.

And let your awareness open further to the earth around you. If you're in the Northern hemisphere and it's springtime, there's this amazing recreation of green and flower and bloom every year, wherever you are on the earth. I remember going where there'd been a forest fire, and it rained, and two years later that earth was so thick with green and bushes and young trees insisting on rebirth.

And you breathe gently and feel how the earth renews herself just as you breathe. Trust it. And you sit in this vast stream of recreation—body and heart, mind and earth around you. You sit as a Buddha, witnessing the earth recreating itself in all things. You rest in mindful loving awareness and a timeless trust. You are the loving witness of all things renewing themselves again and again. Change and renewal. You are the loving witness. You are the awakened mindfulness and love itself, witnessing life. Steady and gracious amidst it all.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to open gently. Come back to the visual realm. And let yourself stay with a sense of loving awareness and presence.

And we'll take a five-minute break. If you can remain silent, that would be good. And then we'll come back for teachings.

Hi again, dear friends.

So now we have this part of the Monday night sitting group, which is the teachings. My invitation to you is to take this as a time to relax and listen in a meditative way. You don't have to take notes, you don't have to remember anything—no quiz. Just listen and notice if there are things that touch your heart, that ring true. Let them be a reminder. And things that don't seem helpful, you can simply let them go. This is a kind of inner meditation: to notice, from the outer words and stories and forms, what happens in here. A kind of invitation.

Tonight I'd like to give a talk that's a teaching I've given in previous years—with some stories you may have heard before, as they're among my favorites, and some new ones. It seems particularly fitting since this is the first week of spring in the Northern hemisphere, and we had the eclipse of the moon last night with the solar eclipse coming.

I remember some years ago going up on top of Mount Tamalpais when there was a transit of Venus to be viewed through a telescope across the face of the sun. There were a number of telescopes set up, and I remember looking into the eyepiece. There was that amazing, roiling fire disc of our star, the sun. In a big telescope it's extraordinary to

watch because it's alive—like an ocean of color and fire. And then there was this little black dot, like a tiny marble, Venus making its way over the course of two hours across the face of the sun.

It was like seeing the music of the spheres, because I could feel: oh, that's the size of our planet too. Our little planet—ours is the little blue one, the next one out from Venus—making its circuit around our star. This is us.

We have the music of the spheres and the season of renewal of spring, which is also celebrated in Easter and other renewal holidays after long winters or rains. You walk out sometimes and spring pops. The plum blossoms are there, the forsythia are blooming, the quince. I actually planted quince and forsythia at Spirit Rock knowing that we had the two-month winter retreat in February and March. I wanted people to see the flowers start to come out as their heart and mind opened in that long retreat.

Now there's an old debate in Buddhist teachings about awakening being gradual or sudden. Is it sudden, like spring comes—there you are, you can sort of see the buds on the trees, and then a warm day and it all pops out and the flowers bloom? Or is it a gradual process?

From the sudden awakening perspective, the question is: where are we going? We're not going from here to there. We're going from there to here. From all the ways we may somehow be thinking we're somewhere else, to remember that we're always here in the present.

Meditation, says Alan Watts, is kind of like making music or dancing. The point of making music is not to get to the end of the piece. If that were true, the fastest musicians would be the best: "I got through that piece, give me another one!" Or the point of dancing isn't to have your partner and then dance them down to the grocery store or to some errand. The point of making music and the point of dancing is to be in rhythm just where you are.

And Alan Watts goes on: so the point of meditation isn't some goal that we're going to get to, but the coming into harmony here and now, always. This is T.S. Eliot's phrase—the still point, a condition of complete simplicity, here and now. Asking a surrender of everything. You could call it the reality of the present. A condition of complete simplicity.

And so here we are. Be here now.

Ajahn Chah tried to describe it in the metaphor of still flowing water. Still flowing water.

When we get quiet and take a walk outside with the mind a little quiet and the heart and body open, we become something like the phrase from Mary Oliver. She says, "I was a bride married to amazement," because we sense the mystery of life. We don't know, we can't explain—but we can engage it with our awareness, with our heart. A timeless awareness. We become that space of witnessing, of loving awareness itself, timeless awareness that notices, as we did in the meditation, how everything renews itself.

And the planet circles the sun, and we become the space that holds it all. This is the spacious awareness of awakening, of the Buddha.

And then the mystery is what it is, but somehow in the space of our awareness, joy and sorrow and birth and death and praise and blame and gain and loss—all the opposites that make up human life—are felt as a kind of rhythm or harmony, like the Tao.

And we all know this. We've had our moments. Maybe walking high in the mountains, or sitting with someone as they're giving birth, or giving birth yourself as a woman, or sitting with someone as they die in that mysterious moment when consciousness leaves the body, silent like a falling star. We know the sense of mystery and rhythm—lying on the grass in the summer and looking at the night sky, or listening to a transporting piece of music, or taking psychedelics, or going on retreat. We've all touched it. We've all had the sense of the mystery and the cosmic dance.

And as one Zen master, Rinzai, speaks of it in perfection, he says, "When I understood, I could go into the three deepest hells as if playing in the fairground and cavort with the most ferocious wild animals, because I saw it all as part of this great dance—all of it."

And even sometimes, in a blessed way, when I've gone in to do prison work or to refugee camps where people are suffering, sometimes immensely, there will be certain people who say, "I may be behind bars, but I'm free." Or they're in a refugee camp and they beam at you with such love and presence. And you can feel from them that the circumstances don't touch the true heart that they are, that true free loving awareness. They become this.

So take a moment to reflect yourself. What were the times when you've experienced this timeless dance of mystery? The perfection of it all, with its ocean of tears and its unbearable beauty. You remember, because you know this. And you don't want to wait till you float out of your body when you die and look back and say, "Wow, that was an amazing incarnation, wasn't it?" You actually want to have it now. To be married to amazement.

And so this is the beautiful revelation of sudden awakening—to see the world, the timeless vision of this world recreating itself, and to be at the still point of the turning world.

And yet there's another side, because we are creatures of paradox. Zen master Suzuki Roshi put it so simply. He said, "You're perfect just the way you are, and there's still room for improvement."

One of the great Korean Zen masters, Sunil, spoke of it in a different way. He said the Zen path for him was one of sudden realization and then gradual practice. Instead of practice to get to realization, it was the mystery, the realization, and then the fulfillment of it. You're perfect just the way you are. Take that in, because it's true. And then, with a smile and playfully, he said, "And there's still room for improvement."

And we can see this. We can see the ways that we get lost in what's called the body of fear—the small, separate sense of self, our confusion and ignorance and grasping, the kind of pains that we go through that stick, the trauma that we have. The way we get lost. And we live in a culture of the absence of the sacred, that takes us away from the sense of mystery.

So how do we shift this? How do we work with this—to shift from the body of fear, this illusion of separateness, to live with that deep realization?

Early one morning, while out on his alms round, the Blessed One, the Buddha, approached an area being plowed in springtime, where a wealthy Brahmin was distributing food to his workers. When the Brahmin saw the Buddha with an alms bowl, he said, "Oh monk, I plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat. Do you likewise plow and sow, and having done so, you eat?"

He was confronting the Buddha, saying, "Listen, I'm a landowner, I have people work for me and I work, and then I get food. How about you with your alms bowl?"

And the Buddha looked back and said, "I also plow and sow, and having done so, I eat."

And the Brahmin said, "You claim this, but I see no plow. What is it you do?"

The Buddha replied, "Faith is the seed and composure the rain. Clarity is my plow and yoke. Compassion is my guide pole and mind is the harness. Mindfulness is the plow blade and my goad—caring in action and speech. I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen, drawing the plow steadily toward freedom without regret."

This is how I plow, and it bears the fruit of freedom—the deathless itself.

At this point, the Brahmin, the wealthy landowner, says, "I see that you are a plowman. Let me place some food into your bowl." And he tried to put food into the Buddha's bowl. When he poured the rice gruel into the bowl, it hissed and a huge cloud of steam rose up—or so the story tells.

I love these old mythological weavings in the story, because the metaphor here is that if you've ever touched a plow blade after it digs a furrow across a field, it gets really, really hot. It can almost get red hot from plowing. And so the Buddha's alms bowl becomes the plow blade, and putting anything wet in it causes it to hiss because he's been plowing.

I love this text, this encounter that's described. As the Buddha talks about planting seeds with faith and trust and mindfulness, and as we practice—as we establish over the months and years of our own meditation our mindful loving awareness, as we establish loving kindness and forgiveness and compassion as our practices—they too become part of what bears the fruit of inner freedom, inner wellbeing. And you can feel it in yourself. It grows, it opens, it flourishes.

So good. Now we're plowing, we've put in beautiful seeds—faith and trust, energy, the oxen of wise effort, mindfulness and so forth. But then what? Obstacles arise.

If you have a garden, there are weeds, insects, drought, storms, gophers—all kinds of things you have to work with once you've planted your seeds. All of you who are gardeners know this very well. And similarly, whatever else you choose to do as an activity, whatever you devote yourself to—be that field, if you will, of attention—when you do it, obstacles will arise.

If you start a business, at some point there will be obstacles: a key employee quits, the market changes, you don't have enough capital, there are supply chain problems, there's competition. If you're parenting—oh my gosh, it's an obstacle course. First, they want to put everything in their mouth. I remember when my daughter—we were driving down the coast, I don't know how many months old she was, like five months or something—she grabbed a penny and put it in her mouth. I looked and it was gone; she'd swallowed it. We called her pediatrician: "What do we do? Is this an emergency?" And the pediatrician said, "It's okay. It'll be all right." I was still quite worried. Two days later, I was changing her diaper, and in the diaper was the shiniest penny I'd ever seen.

But there you are. You've got a kid and they want to put things in their mouth, or they're in preschool and they hit each other with blocks and you say, "No, no, use your words," or "Don't run into the street." They learn to ride a bicycle and they fall. They go

through puberty—remember that one? And then they learn to drive. And then there's sexuality and their independence. Lots of obstacles. And you have to keep steadily continuing your care.

The same holds true for social change. The money dries up, the activists burn out, the politics change. Or in love relationships—at first, it seems so compatible. You fall in love. But we all know that story. As you get close, the shadows arise, the difficulties come as well. And that's what love is about: how to tend the obstacles.

And you sure enough know it in meditation. That's why there are all these texts about the hindrances—the arising of fear and anxiety and doubt and confusion and anger and all of those kinds of things.

The poet Hafez says: "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it season you. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few divine ingredients can."

And so instead of getting rid of these things as you meditate—because they will all come up—you watch your mind. Remember that roadside billboard someone saw driving across Arizona: "Your own tedious thoughts, next 200 miles." I think it was actually in a cartoon. But you sit with all these things, and as you practice, whether you're a parent or a business person or a meditator, the obstacles come and the hindrances arise, and you become the loving witness that tends them with care.

A poem for you:

My son comes into the kitchen and asks if he can have an avocado. Avocado, he says, loving the weight of each green syllable on his five-year-old tongue. Avocados represent an immense step for him, an evolutionary leap far beyond the narrow confines of cornflakes wherein he has dwelt for so long. The breast, the cornflakes, the avocado—such has been his journey thus far. You'll have to wait until they're ripe, I tell him. Do you want some cereal instead? No thanks, he says, and wanders back into the world of being five, while I, doing dishes at this point, start thinking about ripening and how glad I am that it takes time. And his own ripening will be years in the making. Years, I say aloud, enjoying that long luxurious syllable, like a cat stretching out my tongue. As Michael comes in again—it's been five minutes—and asks, are they ripe yet?

This is from George Mugier, "Are They Ripe Yet?" And that's what we see too when we sit: the impatience, and where are we going, and are we there yet?

I love the story of these two men who went up to the great botanical garden in Montreal. They drove up because it has the largest collection of bonsai in North America. They drove a long way to get there, this man and his husband. And they got to the

gates and they were locked—it was closed that week. One of them chided the other and said, "Didn't you look into it?" You know how it is as a couple. "Weren't you supposed to figure that out? We came all this way and it's closed."

But the other, who was in a more contemplative mood in his life, said, "The gates are closed. Let's just take a breath." And he started to walk, like doing walking meditation, in front of these huge gates and the great facade and the sign of the Montreal Botanical Garden. Then he began to walk further, slowly, just contemplating: What's the next move? What will we do? His partner followed him and they walked further around the side of the great garden. After about five minutes of walking, the fence disappeared and you could just go in. It turned out there was a big gate and a big front, but it wasn't walled in all the way around.

It was that patience of allowing space to open—saying, instead of trying to break down the gates or blame, "Hey, let's take a breath. Let's walk a little. Let's see what there is. Let's see what wants to unfold."

And so we practice. We make space. The text says: As the farmer channels water to his crops and as the carpenter turns his wood, so the wise one pays attention graciously to what's in front of them, directing their heart and mind.

Let yourself reflect for a moment on the quality of loving presence and what it's like when you're not in a hurry, when you're trusting. Presence becomes an act of love and graciousness, space opening. Remember when this happens for you. You can know. Delicious, isn't it, when you remember it?

That's what meditation does. It makes space. We step out of the thrall of our plans and our thoughts and our reactions and how it should be and what's happened and what should happen. Out of the fears and confusions and sadness and excitement and all of those things. And we become the space of awareness, of loving awareness that says, "Yes, it's an act of love."

And then what? Well, the texts say you want to plant good seeds.

He says, consciousness is like a field filled with all kinds of seeds. And for human beings, these are seeds of fear and anger and greed and hatred and confusion—and seeds of love and caring, seeds of wisdom and understanding, seeds of mindfulness and forgiveness. Which seeds will grow?

He goes on: When you tend your garden and you water the seeds of respect and presence, of love and kindness, of mindfulness itself, those are the seeds that will grow. If you water the seeds of anger, anger grows. If you water the seeds of kindness, you practice it, you tend it, you remember it—it grows. It means that you stay connected to your deep intention.

Thoreau put it this way. He said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there and I'm prepared to expect miracles."

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you are. Sons and daughters of the Buddha, nobly born, you have within you good seeds. And the Buddha goes on: it's not by caste or race or creed or background, by religion or wherever or however you're born, whatever body or incarnation or ability. He says one is noble by heart. If there's nobility in the heart, that is what brings awakening. "Oh nobly born," these texts begin, reminding you of your own good seeds.

I love this story. I have told it over the years. There was a teacher in Ohio, a high school math teacher, who had a student she liked quite a lot and became close to. It turned out that in her class, in the autumn semester near Thanksgiving, the class was getting really restless. She was watching the teenagers and how critical they can be of themselves and one another. So before the holiday, in the last class, she wrote the name of every one of the thirty-one students in the class on the blackboard. She asked them to copy it down and then to write on that piece of paper one thing that they observed that they liked or appreciated or admired about that student in their class. Before the holiday, she collected them.

Then in the springtime, again before spring break—the class was rowdy and nobody was learning math anyway—she called the class to attention and handed back a gift. She had taken those thirty-one pages and cut them apart, put the name of a student at the top of each page, and pasted in the thirty-one good things that their fellow students had said of them. People got them and read them and loved them.

Well, it turns out that Billy, we'll call him, was in the class—a bit of a cutup, but also really sweet, and she had a great connection with him. He went into the military, and his mother called the teacher two or three years later and said, "I have to tell you, I'm so sorry. I know he was one of your favorite students. He was killed in action in the Middle East. We're having a memorial service this weekend and I thought you might want to come."

So the teacher went, and there at the graveside, people stood and spoke about Billy and their affection for him. Then his mother turned to the teacher and said, "You know, they sent back to me everything Billy was carrying on the field of battle. And one of the things in his pocket was this." She opened that page—that had obviously been opened and closed many times—with the thirty-one things that people had written that they liked about Billy or appreciated. Then the girl next to her said, "Oh, I always carry mine," and took it out of her purse. And a boy across the way said, "Yeah, I carried it with me when I got married, in my wedding."

It's such an extraordinary thing, not only to sense the good seeds that we carry, but to acknowledge them and to water them. Because it's who you really are. You sense them and you tend them.

And then the Buddhist texts go on: "As a bee gathers nectar and perfume from the flowers without marring their beauty, let the wise one wander, bringing blessings to many and harm to none."

So we feed these seeds of goodness with our attention and our care and our forgiveness and our kindness—all those different dharma qualities. We nourish them, remember them, sense them, inhabit them.

But what's important also is not to be idealistic about it. You're not trying to make some beautiful house, you know, those magazines—House and Garden—"I'm going to make this photogenic life and post it on Instagram and become a Buddhist influencer." It's not about perfection.

Remember the story of the young physician who was driving her four or five-year-old daughter to preschool, kid in the child seat in the back. Her little daughter opened her doctor's bag and pulled out the stethoscope, playing with it, and put it in her ears like she'd seen her mother do. The mother in the front seat glanced back and thought, "Oh, maybe my daughter will go to medical school, she'll be a doctor like me"—all the thoughts that parents might have. Then the little girl took the other end of the stethoscope, put it up to her mouth, and said, "Welcome to McDonald's."

May I take your order, please?

We have so many ideas about how it's supposed to be. But as the bee gathers the nectar and perfume from flowers without marring their beauty, so let the wise ones attend to whatever arises and bring kindness and blessing—not their ideas about it, but the actual experience of the way things are.

And then you just stay steady. Again, the poetry of the Buddha: just as the rainwater jar is filled drop by drop, so may those who practice loving-kindness and presence find their hearts filled with drops of awareness and love.

And of course, the conditions all keep changing. Sometimes it's hot or cold, the sun's out, there are big storms. You know about the changing conditions. You know about the difficulties. And when we live in the heart, when we live in the space of loving awareness, of the inner freedom that is your birthright—when things are difficult, you ask, what's the lesson here? What is this inviting me to understand or grow in? Growing in courage, growing in forgiveness, fearlessness, growing in perseverance or compassion, growing in understanding.

My teacher Ajahn Chah loved difficult conditions. He loved it when we had a hard time. We were in an ascetic forest monastery where things were really tough, and he relished that it was tough. At times he would ask us, "When did you learn the most? When things were easy? Or when did you really learn in your own heart the deep dharma?"

This from Karlfried Dürckheim, a Zen teacher: "The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not as a consequence turn only to those friends who offer refuge and comfort so their old self can survive. Rather, they will seek out those who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

So you're doing your garden, you're planting, you're practicing, you're watering the seeds—and baby, it'll get tough. People die. People get sick. Your body will get sick. You'll lose things. Finances go up and down. All the things of life will happen. This is your practice. And not in a glib way. This is the place to find that which is timeless and indestructible.

Reflect for a minute. Take a pause. And remember when you've gone through serious difficulties—we all have—and what you were called to learn in your heart.

What you begin to notice when you reflect in this way is the magic of a shift of identity. When you get through those difficulties, you become what Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows." You become the field of mindful, loving awareness itself. You become

like the Bodhisattva—the being who goes through difficulties not only to go through them and to awaken with all those seeds, but in some deep way, from that, to be able to offer that spirit of freedom to whatever else you encounter and touch.

This happens—you know this. You know when you've gone through something difficult that when you finished, you became something bigger and wiser and freer. And for the Bodhisattva, it's like they say, "Yes, is there something difficult to do around here? Someone in difficulty?" And you turn toward it and say, "Aha, perfect place to practice."

I love the story of Kathy Sneed. She worked in the sheriff's office in the city and county of San Francisco. Then she got sick and was looking to somehow change her work due to serious illness, but still needed to work. She got permission—there had been an old garden as part of a very large jail complex—to help the inmates there plant a garden. And that was the beginning of Kathy Sneed's prison garden project. People were really dubious about it, saying, "Hey, these inmates, these prisoners can be mean and lazy. Why would they ever want a garden?"

But of course, Kathy, who had witnessed the racist poverty pipeline into prisons over the years—where people came in from communities with so few resources—understood that this is often where you end up if you were born into that kind of poverty. She said, "Give me a chance."

And she got some men to go out and dig some beds. She got volunteer gardening centers to deliver good soil and amendments. She got people to offer up seeds for her. And she took some of the most hardcore residents and gave them hoes and shovels, gardening implements—and they loved it.

It gave them a sense of purpose, and the garden started to grow. Over the years, the garden produced literally thousands of pounds of organic food, which they gave to soup kitchens and those who were homeless around the community.

And she said it was amazing. You'd see this guy, all tough, and you'd go into the garden and someone would be walking by, and he'd say, "Don't step on those flowers, man. I just planted those. Be careful of those tomatoes." As if they were tending their own children. They got so connected to this, and to the fact that they could renew themselves through the garden. Because it wasn't just about the garden. It was really about giving a chance for that renewal that we all long for.

Yes, it reduced recidivism when they got out—but not as much as expected. And then they discovered something wild: some of these men were actually breaking parole or doing things that would get them back in prison because they missed their garden. So she started the Inside and Outside garden project, so you didn't have to come back in to tend your garden.

But this is what we're doing. We're taking this fertile earth—yes, with its gophers and its insects and all those things—and we're making something beautiful, outside and inside. And it's completely trustworthy. As Tennessee Williams said, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's a power in planting seeds and tending them. This is the garden of the heart.

Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. You are creativity itself, born into this incarnation. You are creative consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh calls it hide and seek. You pretend that you're a human being, but who you are is life itself.

And of course, you have dozens of identities. You're a son or a daughter, a parent or a sibling at times. You can have multiple identities. In one room, you'll be the child of someone and the parent of another person. You're a student at times, you're a teacher. You have your ethnic identity, your racial identity, your gender identity, your political identity—"I'm a liberal" or "a conservative" or whatever.

But that's not who you are. That's the hide and seek part. That's part of the incarnation you got to work with and play with, but it's not who you are. Who you are is consciousness itself. You are loving awareness, vast and timeless. You are the creativity of life displaying itself, playing in this human form. Hide and seek, says Thich Nhat Hanh. Remember who you really are. There's a freedom no one can take from you.

Take a breath. Reflect. Amidst it all, there is a freedom no one can take from you. Feel the space of loving awareness, vast enough to hold it all, timeless. You get to be the loving witness—like the Buddha touching the earth, seeing all of the renewal season by season, all the joys and sorrows seen with the eyes of compassion and wisdom.

And what do you do then? You see it, you sense it, and you become like a bodhisattva. Not because you're supposed to, but because it's all you. You're not separate from it. Every breath, every cell in your body knows you're connected. And so you reach out—

touch and mend what you can, because it's part of you. It's all you. This is us.

I spoke to the mother of a very beloved and kind-hearted man, Gabriel Klein, who died in an accident recently. At his memorial, his brother-in-law described going to Costco with this warm-hearted and very special young man on a stormy day. They did

all their shopping, getting ready for something, and then went back out into the pouring rain in the parking lot, got to their car, and loaded all the things. The brother-in-law who had the cart sort of pushed it aside so they could get the car out. But instead, Gabriel got out in the pouring rain and walked the cart all the way back to the store.

After they drove away, his brother-in-law asked, "Why did you do that?"

And Gabriel said, "There's a person there whose job it is to take the cart from point A to point B, from the lot back. There's no reason to make their job harder." He said, "It seems like there are two kinds of opportunities for people in the world. There are the kind of people who leave the cart, and those who bring it back."

So tiny and so simple. And yet that bodhisattva vow—in Diane Ackerman's words, a kind of modern bodhisattva vow: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

Whether it's the shopping carts in the lot in the rain, whether it's someone you encounter on the street, whether you get in a fender bender accident, or whether you're going to your business or school or wherever—you get to be the loving one. You get to be the one with the free heart. You get to be the bodhisattva or the Buddha amidst it all.

And it's not like it's going to turn out and everything will be hunky-dory and great. It says in the Bhagavad Gita that the secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of the action—to plant beautiful seeds, to water them, to care for them, and trust that in their own time, they will bear fruit.

It's never too late to tend and water the good seeds in the heart and mind. And water and tend the good seeds in your actions and deeds in the world around. It's never too late.

The practice I want to suggest to you as we wind down is again a reflection. For those who want more of it, you can look in my book *The Lamp in the Darkness*. There's a whole extensive guided meditation in which you allow an awakened being or an awakened figure to take over your own life and see what they do. Because the wisest part of you already knows. You already know.

So here's your practice for tomorrow, this evening, this week, this year: Pretend you're enlightened. Pretend you're spacious and gracious like a Buddha—wise, allowing for all things, at peace in the midst of them. Seeing the world with the great heart of compassion. Reaching out and mending or touching the things that you can, the things that come to you, with compassion and kindness.

Imagine it, feel it. Suppose you were to decide, "All right, I will act and live and pretend as if I am a Buddha, as if I am awakened." What would that be like at work? At home? Toward yourself? You can sense or picture it because you do know.

O nobly born, remember who you are.

So thank you for listening. Happy spring to you in the Northern Hemisphere, and a beautiful autumn for those in the Southern Hemisphere, and a beautiful ongoing flowering of life for those in the middle by the equator. All good, as they say. All good.

And I wanted to hear the good stuff, obviously. But I wanted to tell you that you have been helping me a great deal with my father right now. He is 97 years old with dementia and doesn't remember that he served as a leukemia doctor for over 60 years. And this man who has been the hardest karmic relationship this go-round is now like a little child. And all of my hospice practice is coming to bear, just being loving with him. I have been able to forgive him and just feel so grateful for this dharma path.

Thank you. I can see it. I mean, it's hard. Sometimes it doesn't happen till near the end. The very end.

So thank you.

There's also something strange. It's not that likely, but sometimes—I'm going to use an image just because it's fun, about dementia, to kind of expand the conversation. Back in the 1970s, there was a series of books by this sort of channeled entity named Seth—

Seth Speaks. I remember.

You're old enough, you might remember those. And there was an image in that book. Seth, or whoever he was talking to, had gone to an old age home, a place where people were placed when they needed care. And he said, "I want you to look at this. What do you see?" And the fellow said, "I see a porch with eight rocking chairs and eight people who are nodding or drooling on themselves, really out of it." And Seth said, "Do you want to know what I see?" "Of course." "Well, I see that line of people, but I actually see they're all up there above that place having a party. Their bodies are down here and they're actually talking and having a great time."

I'm not saying it's completely true. Who knows? Because it's so mysterious. But there's some way—not only have you worked through with your forgiveness, and that's so important, and I so respect it—but also there's a kind of mystery in dementia. Like, who are we? Sometimes there's something there that we can't even tell, but what's left is love. And that's what you're doing.

And he's talking with my deceased mom, you know.

Who knows where she is. Maybe. We don't know. Maybe they're talking. You think he's there. He's out with your deceased mom. It's really mysterious, but your heart is what you get to tend, and it's beautiful.

Thank you, Ginger. So glad to see you.

Thank you for this evening. This is actually my first time in this space, and I feel very welcomed and very happy to be here. I was really moved by what you said about the culture—that we live in a culture of the absence of the sacred. I have worked for every tech company, most of them, and I swim in those waters. This notion of the rational, of meritocracy, of this resistance to seeing the inequity in the world and the absence of the sacred.

I just wanted to share that "just pretend you're enlightened" is such a beautiful, funny invitation—just to not fight, to know your true nature, to know my true nature. I'm an MMTCP graduate and I teach every Wednesday, which I love. Thank you for that, because I think those of us who are in workplaces feel a sense of duality. I'm very grateful, very blessed to be here.

Thank you, Jess. I want to ask you, because whether it's the tech world or other places—I'll get a call from somebody who's in the military, and it's not that all the military is that way, but parts of it are very difficult. Even if you close your eyes and remember, what does it feel like when you're living in your own loving awareness in the midst of that tech world? On a good day, when you feel you're staying true to yourself and your values and the sense of the sacred amidst it all—what is that like? What have you learned?

I think that I don't have to fight everyone's fight. I feel a sense of release. There's a physicality almost, a leaning back—it's not a forward motion of having to prove or change or educate someone, but more of meeting this person where they are.

Yes.

And hopefully they can meet me where I am. There's that sense of connection. That's when it's felt good. And I also realize that people bring with them to the workplace—it's not just a workplace, it's our lives. People say work-life balance, but it's just your life and it just shows up. So I try to remember that people are on their path, on their journey, and are coming to this Zoom screen or wherever we are with their own pain and suffering and misconceptions.

That's true. They come and who knows what happened to them that morning. They could have a sick kid, they could have all those things. But I'm tuning into your description of feeling the relief and the sense of not fighting or trying to prove things. Instead, there's what you described as a kind of inner graciousness. Feel that and sense that that's who you are. You know this.

And of course you'll get riled up. We all do at certain points. I'm Italian from New Jersey—it's part of our DNA. No big surprise about that. You can get riled up. But let this be your resting place. Let this be the kind of source code, if you will, underneath all that. For yourself, this graciousness and not trying to prove, but just being there as a loving presence and doing what you do.

Yes, and some of them will be kind and some of them will be difficult. But even that graciousness you have with people who are difficult, with those who are fighting—it helps in some way. You carry something beautiful in you, and you can bring it there.

Thank you. Thank you for your time.

Thank you. A pleasure.

fairly common that people who are attending somebody who's dying, especially if they're not conscious, they're there and then they have to go out and go to the bathroom or they have to go get something. And that's when the person dies.

"That was with my dad," she said. "The first night I left, after nine nights."

And that's partly, I think, because it's too hard to leave when somebody's there that you love. And it's like, "Okay, I need a little privacy. Thank you. I'm about to leave my body. I want you to feel this." So we have our needs—"Oh, this special moment"—but believe me, you'll have plenty of time with the body. It's okay. If you're there for that moment on the last breath, fine. If you're not, it's not like, "Oh God, you missed the train."

So that's the first thing to say. Because what really matters, and this is what you're talking about, is your presence. To the extent that you can be peaceful, hold their hand, be loving, breathe with them when they're still breathing—pairing your breath with someone is an amazing practice to do. Especially right after death, you get all these strange breath rhythms and things like that. But if you pair your breath with them, very gently breathing when they do, you start to feel an even deeper connection. And it's not the connection of your ideas, but just that energetic sense. Then you do it with a sense of metta and loving-kindness.

As they leave, I like to do a kind of blessing of loving-kindness in which I envision and sense them released from their body. And then the body becomes nothing—it just becomes, you know, dead. You can feel the spirit leave the body like a silent, amazing thing. And then to try to feel that, to somehow hold that spirit where they're going with trust and love, and say, "It's okay, let go. Let go into the light. Let go into the ocean of peace." I say it out loud sometimes.

And saying that—it's not complicated. There are all kinds of elaborate Tibetan things, but if you read the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Ars Moriendi from the Middle Ages, there are all these different traditions. What matters in the end is love and presence. Because that's what we look for when someone comes in and when they go out.

Now with your mom with Alzheimer's, I also have this feeling that the Tibetans talk about going through all these bardo experiences, right? They're not just when you leave your body. They're already there in dementia. In some way, she's not all here anymore. She's already entered the in-between and those states.

So when you're with her, in some way you can acknowledge: your body's here, and who you are is more than this. You're already out there somehow. And you don't have to try to pull her back. You can say, "I love you wherever you are" or something like that. You can actually sense this is organic, and she knows how to die. The body just knows how to breathe. It also knows how to let go and die. Sometimes it gets difficult, painful—

You get all those kind of last-minute spasms and things like that, death throes. Mostly people who've had near-death experiences and gone through and come back say, "Yeah, that was just my body. I was already mostly out of it, not in the body."

So you become the space of love. And the ocean of peace that you want her to let go into.

Close your eyes just for a second since we're talking. What's your mom's name?

"Carol."

And let yourself picture Carol and being with her as she gets weaker. And it may take a while, as you say. It could be a year or five years. You don't know. And there, finally, it's time. And you're there with her. And imagine that you're Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, just looking at her with kindly eyes, that all her incarnation is ending. And you're the field of loving awareness itself, peaceful and gracious. It's like, "Carol, you know how to do this. We're together. Dear mom, you know how. You know how to let go. You know how to be at peace. We can do this together."

How does it feel?

"It feels good. And what's beautiful about what you've said, and what's really helped me, is that I'm realizing she's been in this process for a long time. Because with my dad, I witnessed for him the last nine days, just looking up and speaking into the air to whoever was showing up for him, and his process of letting go. But what you've said has made me realize that she's been doing that for several years in her dementia, looking and talking in ways we don't understand. But I think that may have been parts of her letting go, just in a longer version. So when I picture us being there, I picture my sister and myself, but I also feel my dad in that room, which makes me think that it's not necessarily important that I'm physically in the room—because I will be in the room. We all will be in the room with her when it happens."

Beautiful what you say. It's really deep. And we're in this conversation about something so mysterious, mysterious to all of us. It's like you're turning and facing into the great mystery. We're not that personality. We're something so much more.

"Yes. And that connection is so real after someone passes. It's so near after someone passes, for quite some time. And that mystery is something really special to lean into."

Yeah. Thank you.

I've talked about this before, about how I was in Asia and knew that someone I cared about—I felt that they died. And then I got a message sometime afterward: they died in an accident. And I thought, how did I know that? And I've had other experiences. So I ask in a group, I'll say, "How many of you have the experience of knowing someone died at a distance, unexpected?" Lots of hands go up. It's incredible. Exactly what you're saying—that we actually are with each other. We're connected in that way. And you described it so beautifully. Thank you.

"Thank you."

So this is where we'll end tonight. It's a gift you give us to describe that.

"Thanks, Jeff."

I thank you, Chris. And maybe I'll be with you for a little bit too in that room, now that I know—with you and Carol and your sister.

"I hope you are. You blessed our first daughter, Ruby. So you have an important place in our life."

All right. Thank you.

So if you're interested, look on my website for that.

I'm just glad that we get to spend this time together. These teachings are ones that you already know—that you get to do something, make something beautiful of your life. And that's what they remind us of.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment. And if you like, you good-hearted people, you can unmute yourself and offer a little blessing or message to some of your fellow practitioners on the screen. Feel free.

CHAPTER 46

The Listening Heart: Mindfulness in Troubled Times

Jack Kornfield · 1h29

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Jack Kornfield invites us to discover the transformative power of deep listening during challenging times. Beginning with a guided meditation, he leads practitioners through connecting with the breath, receiving messages from the body and heart, and opening to intuitive wisdom through visualization. The practice cultivates what the Pāli tradition calls sati-sampajañña—mindful presence combined with mindful response.*
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> *Kornfield reflects on how difficulties serve as doorways to awakening, drawing on teachings from his teacher Ajahn Chah and the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. He shares the remarkable story of Yeshe Dunden, physician to the Dalai Lama, whose profound pulse diagnosis exemplifies sacred listening that modern medicine has forgotten. Through the inspiring account of Vinoba Bhave's land reform movement—born from simply listening to villagers across India—Kornfield illustrates how quiet attention can catalyze massive positive change.*
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> *Weaving together teachings from Gandhi, Jane Goodall, Black Elk, and the Dalai Lama, this talk offers practical wisdom for responding to climate change, political division, and personal struggles. Rather than reacting from fear or anxiety, we are invited to quiet the mind, tend the heart, and trust our innate capacity for wisdom and compassion. Kornfield reminds us that we have been training for these times, and through loving awareness, we can know when to speak, when to act, and when to simply be present.*

With great respect and with great kindness, it's a pleasure to welcome you all to Spirit Rock. Spirit Rock is located both online globally and on land in the San Geronimo Valley, which is part of unceded Coast Miwok ancestral territory in Northern California.

When we say welcome, we welcome you all—all parts of you: your color, your culture, beliefs, gender, orientations, abilities, ages, education, and economies, full-hearted or broken-hearted. Bravely take your place in this international circle.

I want to acknowledge your generous dana, your donations and registration fees to Spirit Rock, which are deeply appreciated and needed at this time. Your fees keep us able to offer online and on-land teachings. They support the scholarship program, and they also go to support our teachers. So thank you for joining us in the Dharma.

Jack Kornfield, founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, will be our speaker tonight. This offering has been prerecorded earlier today, and therefore there will be no Q&A session afterwards. Jack Kornfield trained as a Buddhist monk in the monasteries of Thailand, India, and Burma. He has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers in the Western insight tradition. He holds a PhD in clinical psychology. He's a grandfather, father, husband, and activist.

Thank you, Christina. Very glad to see you and very glad to see everyone who's joining.

I am in Spain right now, in the south near Malaga, visiting my daughter Caroline and her husband James, and our five-year-old grandson, Desmond. It's really fun hanging out with five-year-olds. They are remarkably smart, and it turns out they have a lot of views and thoughts about the world. We get to engage in a totally wonderful way.

I'm sorry I can't be there live this evening. This is being recorded in the morning because it's going to be nighttime here, and the time difference would mean I would be recording at 4 a.m., which is simply not my best hour.

I'd like to welcome you, as Christina did. This Monday Night Sitting group has now been going on for 39 years, starting in San Anselmo at Fairfax Community Church and then moving onto the land of Spirit Rock. For most of those years—30 years or more—I offered teachings once a week, and now I have changed to once a month. Something about being about to enter my 80th year, turning 79 in the next couple of months, has invited me to slow down.

I welcome you, and in some way perhaps want to invite you also to slow down for this moment. Not to slow down your caring, not to stop acting in all kinds of creative and amazing ways, but to be invited to take a pause that lets you listen and reflect and be present and alive in a deeper way, connected with life.

So what we'll do is sit, as we usually do on Monday night, for about 35 minutes or so with a bit of instruction. Then we'll take a break of five or ten minutes to stretch or relax, followed by a teaching as usual—without, however, the questions and dialogue.

Please let yourself find a way to settle in your body. Find a stable seat. Center yourself. Get ready for this period of meditation.

As you do, bring your attention here quite fully into the present moment. Come into your body, as they say, connecting body, heart, and mind together. Begin perhaps by taking two long breaths. If you wish, you can close your eyes or lower your gaze for this time.

Notice how it is to close your eyes and take a couple of long breaths. Already your body starts to say, "Oh, thank you. Thank you."

Now, as you bring your mindful, loving attention in this moment to your body, let the eyes and face soften. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle and let your neck release and find a simple uprightness. Allow the shoulders to drop, the arms and hands to rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body—gravity pulling you to the seat, your bottom, your feet. As you feel the heaviness of your body met by the earth and what you're sitting on, relax and sense that you can be fully supported just where you are. The earth holds you. You are part of her, and she holds you steady. Feel this deep steadiness, rooted with the earth.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, invite the mind to quiet and the heart to soften further. One of the simplest ways to do so, as you invite the quiet and calm, is to feel your body breathing and relax with each breath. Notice the breath as it touches the nostrils—coolness, or swirling, tingling in the back of the throat.

Or notice the rise and fall of chest or belly. Feel how the breath breathes itself. You are being breathed in the ocean of air that's shared by all the beings that breathe together. The earth is breathing you. Relax into it. With each breath, invite a sense of ease and calm.

If it's at all difficult to sense the breathing, put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand. Leave it there as we practice. It's a fine way to feel the breath.

As you sense the breath, there will arise other thoughts, emotions, sounds, sensations. Let them come and go as they will. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel how the breath breathes itself gently in the midst of it all.

As you relax with each breath, the attention might wander or be pulled away. You might notice when you return to the breath each time that the sense of calm and steadiness can grow. Invite this. Feel even one breath becoming easy and calm. It's a doorway to a steady heart and mind and body together.

As you sense the breath, different moods may arise. The calm might grow deeper, or boredom might arise, or worry, or delight. Let the moods come and go like weather around the breath. You can notice them with a loving awareness and return to sense or feel the breath breathing itself with the whole world, again and again, gently inviting a presence and a calm. This breath, steady. This breath, easy. This breath. Rest in the reality of the present, breathing itself.

As you let the body and mind settle down, quiet and calm, you can begin to listen more deeply. Turn your attention to your body in this calmer, quieter state—not so much looking to pay attention to all its sensations, but with a curiosity or an openness: What does your body want to tell you? If it could remind you of things or speak to you, what does it have to say?

It might have several things to say. It might say, "Thank you. Thank you for taking me out for a walk, or feeding me well." It also might have other things to say. "Remember this. Pay attention to me in this way. Don't forget."

So listen. What messages does your body have to tell you just now, this day? You can hear, or sense, or intuit. You can know. Take your time. Different parts of your body may have different things to say to you. Listen to them. Be open.

With a spirit of gratitude, like a bow to your body, you can say, "Thank you. Thank you for caring so much. I'm listening."

Feel a few breaths now again, breathing and calming, relaxing.

Now bring the same loving attention to your heart—the heart that carries so much longing and love, fear and delight, anger, grief, sweetness and joy. Listen to your heart with compassion and kindness.

Ask your heart, what do I need to remember? What do you want to tell me today on this earth? What matters?

Take your time and listen, or intuit, or sense. You can know what messages your heart has for you just now. Your heart says, "Remember this. Pay attention to this." Let yourself listen to what it tells you.

And again, as you have listened for a time, take a deep breath and return to feeling the rhythm of the earth breathing your breath. How each breath arises and passes in the vastness of space. Rest in it. Relax into it.

In this quiet, you can receive a gift of just what you need to know to live in a beautiful way at this time in your life. With the gift of mind and imagination, which reveals all kinds of things, let yourself picture, as you're quiet, that a wrapped gift is placed in your lap or in your hands. And if you can't picture it, then you'll be able to hear the message that comes with it.

If it's easy to picture, unwrap this gift that's been given to you by the gods. Inside you'll find a clear symbol of just what you need as you move through the weeks and year ahead—just that most beneficial blessing. What is it that you most need? This will symbolize exactly that. Open it, hold it up to the light.

And if there's no visual gift that you see, let yourself imagine that the wisest of spirits and the kindest bend down and whisper in your ear a few words, a sentence or two of wisdom and love, of advice for you just now as you go forth in your life. What do they say? You can hear and sense and imagine and know. Listen.

Taking these gifts—the symbol of just what you need, the words of wisdom and love, and the messages from your body and from your heart—taking them in, carrying them gently now as we get ready to end the meditation.

Send out your loving-kindness and blessings to beings everywhere. Extend your caring heart in every direction, that beings everywhere might also receive blessings and wisdom, compassion and love. Rest in it and offer the blessings like a lamp shining in all directions, like the energy of the heart spreading across the world. Kindness and blessings.

Carrying the treasures, the wisdom, the understanding, the messages from body and heart and beyond, gently allow your eyes to open. Maybe with a half smile. Stay with the sense of quiet, of calm, of steadying.

Tonight I'd like to speak about the listening heart.

Here we are in obviously troubled times. We are, as they say, not out of the woods. There's climate change. There's continuing warfare and continuing racism, conflict and political divisiveness. There are hungry children around the world and grain elevators

full of food elsewhere, and yet the food doesn't reach them. There's so much we care about that really matters, and yet sometimes the things around us seem like they can't be solved, at least not very easily.

Difficult times call on our best spirit. Not every moment, but deeper than that, in a way that we listen and understand how to navigate.

From the perspective of wisdom, there are two dimensions to mindfulness. Mindfulness in Pali, like Sanskrit, is a combination: *sati*, which means mindful presence, and *sampajañña*, which can be translated as mindful response.

Like breathing in and breathing out, we listen deeply, and then we can respond.

Difficulties have a purpose, and my beloved colleague and inspiration Joanna Macy, one of our great elders, calls this the time of the great turning, where humankind has to learn to turn from individualism and "me and mine" and separation and grasping to the wisdom of interdependence and mutual care on this planet.

So there are lessons that we're invited to learn. Ajahn Chah, my teacher, used to love talking about the difficulties we would have in the forest monastery, which at times was very difficult and demanding, or the conflicts that we would get in between ourselves as peaceful monks who were living together. And then we could—I believe the colloquial word is—piss each other off. We could bother one another. We'd have trouble, and then others would come in and talk to us and bring their problems.

And Ajahn Chah would say, "When have you learned more? When everything was going along easily, or when you had to go through your difficulties?" Because the very difficulties you have are the place that truly awakens the heart.

Karlfried Dürckheim, a Zen teacher, writes: "The person really on the way who falls upon hard times will not as a consequence turn only to those friends who offer refuge and comfort and encourage their old ways to survive. Rather, they will seek out those who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the true spirit of awakening."

And this is what we're called upon—personally, in times of difficulty, in our society, globally. How do we respond? Do we take it all as obstacles and frustration? Or might we also take a breath and sense, here's the opportunity—not an obstacle alone, but a doorway, an opening to something greater.

Take a pause for a moment and reflect on how it is that you respond to difficulties. Is it a challenge? An opportunity? A worry? A fright?

It's pretty easy when things are difficult to go into anxiety, PTSD, grief. It's the body as much as the mind worrying. We get the fight, flight, or freeze response triggered—a limbic hijack. But it doesn't really serve us over the long run. The mind will race and try to figure it out. We can blame, we can go back and forth. You know how we do that. We can worry and repeat ourselves and imagine and think.

But remember Mark Twain's very simple analysis: "My mind has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."

When you're in difficulties, when I'm in difficulties, when we are in difficulties, the first step—maybe the last step too—is the invitation to come into the present, to take some deep breaths, to quiet the mind as we did in our sitting, to listen to the heart. Somehow in this, to find a connection with wisdom, compassion, love. Whether you're an activist or a business person, whether you're a healer or in your own family—listening, quieting the mind, opening the heart, responding with wisdom and compassion.

As Nelson Mandela said, keep it simple. Tie your shoes and keep walking in the right direction.

The art of listening starts right where we are. And it's never done in a fixed or formal way, a kind of prescribed roadway. As many of you have heard me say, there's this passage from Somerset Maugham: "There are three rules for writing the great English novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

And this is a gift—that this day has never happened before. It's new, this week, this month, this year. And we get to be the witness, we get to be the loving presence in the midst of it all.

So with difficulties, take a breath, pause, begin to listen. And let yourself turn to the rise and fall of so many things in the world. We tend to fix things and get worried in this limited way. But the passage from the Tao Te Ching says: "There's a time for being ahead and a time for being behind. A time for being in motion and a time for being at rest. A time for being vigorous and a time for being exhausted."

A time for being in danger and a time for being safe. The wise one sees things as they are without trying to control them. She lets them rise and fall and go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle.

When we pause and hold this bigger picture, we can see different possibilities. I love the book that I speak of many times—on the art of happiness and joy, the dialogue between Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama—where they're playful and they tease each other and make fun, saying, "Hey, you're supposed to be a holy man!" And then Tutu will grab the Dalai Lama's hat. He said, "The way you're acting, you're going to have a bad rebirth." And the Dalai Lama replied, "Well, I hope you'll meet me there," or something like that. They just play with it. In the middle of everything else, there is joy. This is an amazing world. The line from Mary Oliver: "I was a bride married to amazement." Take a pause.

Being with my five-year-old grandson, he has such beginner's mind spirit, as all children do—looking at amazing bugs and birds and the turning of the day, learning about how day and night work as the earth turns itself. He's really interested in the beginnings of science. It's so fantastic to watch his mind open.

And then, like the Dalai Lama and this book of joy, the follow-up is Jane Goodall's book of hope, where she says without hope, she would give up. She goes on: "I go on because I care passionately about children, about nature, about this earth." Or as Wade Davis, the great anthropologist, says: despair is a failure of the imagination.

One of the beautiful things when you read Jane Goodall's story is how, after Richard Leakey—the great scientist in Africa, a paleontologist—suggested she might want to pay attention to the primates, the chimps and the gorillas, she went off to do so. She sat there, and they wouldn't let her get near them. She would follow the band and watch them, and they'd run away. After six months of quiet watching, all of a sudden David Greybeard—the name she gave him—one of the chimp elders, came close to her. She extended some food, or her hand, and suddenly he understood that she was a friend and introduced her to all the others. After that, she could sit among them and watch them raise their children, watch the teenagers make trouble as all teenagers do, and see who was caring for whom.

This is mindfulness. This is the mindfulness of the heart. You could call it heartfulness. It invites a deep listening—another dimension, not trying to get something done, but stepping out of time. Seeing, settling, listening to what wants to be learned and known in a deeper octave.

Tonight I'm also going to tell or read some of my favorite stories from the past. If you've heard them before, there will be new details. Plus, it's like a bedtime story—"Oh, read that one again."

So this, from Richard Selzer, a surgeon at Yale University, who found out I was reading his stories—now over decades—and sent me a message of appreciation. He was so glad they weren't just sitting on his bookshelves but were coming alive.

Here is a story about Yeshe Dhonden, the physician to the Dalai Lama.

On the bulletin board at Yale Medical School, in the front hall where I work, there appeared an announcement: "Yeshe Dhonden will make rounds at 6 a.m. on the morning of June 10th." The particulars were given, followed by the notation: "Yeshe Dhonden is personal physician to the Dalai Lama." Though I am a skeptic, I could not ignore this emissary from the gods. So on the morning of June 10th, I joined the clutch of white coats waiting in the small conference room adjacent to the ward selected for the rounds. The air in the room is heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement.

At precisely six o'clock, he materializes—a short, golden, barrelly man dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon. His scalp is shaven, and the only visible hair is a scanty black line above each hooded eye. He bows in greeting while his young interpreter makes the introduction. Yeshe Dhonden, we are told, will examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis is unknown to Yeshe Dhonden, as it is to the rest of us. The examination of the patient will take place in our presence, after which we will reconvene in the conference room, where Yeshe Dhonden will discuss the case. We are further informed that Yeshe Dhonden has purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer.

I, having breakfasted well and performed only the most desultory ablutions and given no thought at all to my soul, glanced furtively at my fellows. Suddenly, we doctors seemed a soiled, uncouth lot.

The patient had been awakened early, told she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and had been asked to produce a fresh specimen of urine. When we entered her room, the woman showed no surprise. She had long ago taken on that mixture of compliance and resignation that is the face of chronic illness. This was but another in an endless series of tests and examinations.

For a long time, Yeshe Dunden stepped from the doorway to her bedside and stood apart, watching. He gazed at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I too studied her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gave a clue as to the nature of her disease.

At last, he took her hand, raising it in both of his. Now he bent over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes were closed as he felt for her pulse. In a moment, he had found the spot, and for the next half hour he remained thus suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seemed to have been drawn down into this one purpose. It was palpation of the pulse raised to the state of high ritual.

From the foot of the bed where I stood, it was as though he and the patient had entered a special place of isolation, of apartness, about which a vacancy hovered and across which no violation was possible. After a moment, the woman rested back upon her pillow. From time to time, she raised her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sank back once more. I could not see their hands joined in a correspondence that was exclusive, intimate, his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offered at her wrist.

But all at once, I was envious—not of him, not of Yeshe Dunden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I wanted to be held like that, touched so, received. And I knew that I, who have palpated a thousand pulses, have not felt a single one.

At last, Yeshe Dunden straightened, gently placed the woman's hand upon the bed, and stepped back. The interpreter produced a small wooden bowl and two sticks. Yeshe Dunden poured a small portion of the urine specimen into the bowl and proceeded to whip the liquid with the two sticks. This he did for several minutes until a foam was raised. Then, bowing above the bowl, he inhaled the odor three times. He set down the bowl and turned to leave. All this while, he had not uttered a single word.

As he neared the door, the woman raised her head and called out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. "Thank you, doctor," she said, and touched with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshe Dunden turned back for a moment to gaze at her, smiled, and then stepped into the corridor. Rounds were at an end.

We were seated once more in the conference room. Yeshe Dunden spoke now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds I had never heard before. He was barely begun when the young interpreter began to translate, the two voices continuing in tandem—a bilingual fugue, the one chasing the other. It was like the chanting of monks.

He spoke of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he said—the last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long before she was born, a

wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charged the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in springtime, battering, knocking loose the land and flooding her breath. Thus he spoke, and was silent.

"May we now have the diagnosis?" a professor asked—the host of these rounds, the man who knows answers. "Congenital heart disease," he said. "Interventricular septal defect with resultant heart failure."

A gateway in the heart, I thought, that must not be opened. Through it charged the full waters of her breath, flooding. So here then is the doctor listening to the sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf. I know—I know the doctors to the gods can listen to what we cannot hear.

And I remember now, as I make my rounds, the sound of his voice, like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining. And then a jubilation possesses me, and I too feel myself touched by something divine.

It is an extraordinary story—tender, wise—about what it means to really listen deeply. Whether it is the climate or a pandemic or the politics we share or our deepest concerns, they are all symptoms, and they are all rooted in the human heart. Many of those problems are rooted in human fear, greed, and hatred. What are these symptoms?

Instead of turning on one another and reacting, can we begin to listen to each other? The pains and loss and meaning and fears. As Thomas Merton said, of what use is it if we can travel to the moon when we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from one another? It's possible to listen in a different way to one another.

One of the organizations that I'm so pleased to be connected to and a supporter of is IACT—this small but, as they describe themselves, "small but mighty" anti-genocide group working in the worst camps in Chad, in places in Azerbaijan and Syria, and many, many places with refugees. My beloved Trudy went with them because they asked for an expert in mindfulness and early childhood education, which she is.

IACT operates in the most wonderful way. They go in and, unlike the big NGOs—the UN and other organizations that help in many ways but kind of top-down, just come in, set something up, decide what people need, and deliver it—the IACT people sat down with the women of the camp and said, "What do you need?" They listened for a long time. And the women said, "We need childcare. We need preschool and kindergarten so our children can learn—can learn to learn itself. We need soccer because we want our children not to give up hope for the world and to find joy."

And across now many refugee camps, IACT has helped to provide the soccer training and the preschools, train the teachers and pay the teachers, bring the soccer balls, and help to fund what became Darfur United—the first Darfur soccer team that went to the World International Refugee Soccer Championship, I think it was in Doha. And everyone at the camps turned their radios on and listened to the refugee team that could. This is listening—going in with an open heart and an open mind.

From the Tao it says, "Do you have the patience to let your mud settle and the water become clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?" When you take the time to quiet your mind, to listen with the heart, to bring a loving awareness to the situations you find yourself in, then you can respond in an entirely different way.

We began with this beautiful meditation of quieting ourselves and then asking, "What is it that this body, this precious human body, needs? Where is its tension? What is the care that's asked for or longed for?" We listen to the heart. What does compassion tell us now—for ourselves, those around us, for the earth? We can listen to the earth itself. Just like Jane Goodall, we can get quiet and sit and listen to the trees and the change of seasons, watch the phases of the moon. And of course, hear the cries of the earth, the rhythms. But not just listen—listen so that, like Geshe Dandan, we feel deeply.

A poem from Valencia Robin:

When the hard edges of the book
that I was reading and sang me to sleep woke me,
I assumed thoughts of all I hadn't accomplished weren't far behind.
The people I disappointed, the money I hadn't made,
the power structure I'd rarely opposed.
But instead, I found myself greeted by an almost criminal hope,
somehow free of the social order that had shaped my mind
so that by the time the sun peeked in
and the huge sugar maple that filled my window spoke,
the only thing I questioned was the 40-hour work week
and why the French and Italians got eight weeks of vacation.
Because it's been, what, a million years?
And yet somehow that maple tree knew me.
We talked and talked until I became birched and oaked,
crab-appled and cherried, drunk with all the tree-ness I'd forgotten.
My God, to think I could bud, even blossom.

Nature will speak to you. It does all the time—speaks to us, and we can listen.

One of my favorite stories of this kind of listening is the account of Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba was a close associate and disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. After Gandhi was assassinated, the whole Gandhian movement in India fell into disarray. Yes, there had been the partition of India and Pakistan, and now there was this new state and a lot of hope, but also a lot of confusion.

After a year or two, the followers of Gandhi realized that his work was not done—his work to bring people together, to care for one another, to feel their interdependence. So they decided they needed to come together and have a big gathering of the close followers of Gandhi and the ones who supported them. They invited Vinoba as the most celebrated of the Gandhian leaders. And he declined.

He said, "Gandhi has died. We have to do something different."

They asked and asked. And finally he said, "All right, I will come, but I need to walk." The conference was more than halfway across India. "If you postpone it, I will walk there and come."

Vinoba set out. And as he walked across the countryside, he came to one village and went to the central square, which was under a tree that had been planted there for people to sit and gather. He called a village meeting in the spirit of Gandhi, and he said, "I want to listen."

The farmers and the merchants and those in the village began to talk to him. And one of the things he heard most clearly was from the Dalit, the lowest caste, the untouchables, saying, "We work so hard for others. We so much wish that we had our own land."

Vinoba asked, "How much land do you need?"

They said, "We would need five acres each to farm, to grow food for our families, to take care of our children and the next generation."

"How many families are there?"

There were eighteen families.

He paused, and in the spirit of Gandhi he spoke. "From Mahatma G's lips to my heart and to you, I would ask: is there any way that we can find land for these desperate families?"

And one of the rich landowners of the village stood up and said, "I will donate ninety acres—five acres apiece for these eighteen families—in the name of Gandhi and in the spirit of our new independence."

Everyone was touched and appreciative. And Vinoba slept.

The next day, he went on to another village and listened to them talk about their difficulties and their hopes. At the end, he told the story of what had happened in the previous village. And after he did so, he asked, "How many untouchable families are there here?" There was a certain number. And then again, a wealthy landowner stood up and said, "In the spirit of Gandhi, I will offer twenty-two acres," or whatever it was, "for these families."

Village by village, as Vinoba heard these stories, he helped collect land for the landless. By the time he reached the conference halfway across India, he had collected more than two thousand acres of land for the poorest of the poor.

When he told the story to the whole Congress, everyone got excited. It became the beginning of a movement called the Indian Bhoodan Land Reform Movement. All the followers of Gandhi at that conference, and many others, gathered together and spread out across the many provinces of India. They walked year after year. And in five years, they collected fourteen million acres of land for the poorest of the poor in villages across the whole subcontinent.

It was one of the largest peaceful transfers of land ever to happen on this earth. And all because Vinoba went into the village and sat and listened.

You can listen too. You can know, you can sense the universal truths. Greed, hatred, ignorance—they cause suffering. The more of them, the more suffering. Love, wisdom, generosity, and gratitude—their opposites—bring wellbeing, bring happiness.

How can we foster this? How can we inspire one another with this listening to act from wisdom and love and generosity and gratitude? How can people remember the truth? Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

This is power.

Mark Twain says, "Kindness is the language with which the deaf can hear and the blind can see."

I love the stories of Mr. Rogers. When he speaks about the difficulties in the world—the hurricanes and the floods and the earthquakes and the man-made disasters—he said his mother taught him something: not to look at the tragedy and the suffering, but to look at the helpers. When there was flooding after the hurricane in Houston, from all the states around, people brought their airboats and their pontoons and whatever they could. It was the Cajun Navy that came in and began to disperse among all the flooded houses where people were huddled on rooftops with their children and their dogs. People from states far and near drove to come and rescue and help.

We want to do that. We want to be able to offer ourselves. And what's asked is that we listen and we learn.

I remember when my twin brother was in Dana-Farber in Boston, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. He was diagnosed with and died from blood cancer.

And I spent a lot of time sitting in the waiting rooms and being with him and others and their family members. And what struck me was seeing people come from all over the world to support their families, their loved ones, their friends. And you could see how each person deserved respect, deserved care, deserved to be listened to.

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. See the nobility of others. Remember your capacity for love and compassion no matter what. And include yourself. That too—you, the beings around you. As Chief Seattle said, what is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man.

When we listen, we feel ourselves together. We know we're in it together. And we join with billions of acts of goodness that happened today on this earth. Mothers feeding rice gruel to their young children, or tortillas. Feeding someone who is sick, warming someone who is cold. People stopping at the red light so you can safely pass through the green. A thousand million billion acts of kindness, again and again and again. As Jane Goodall says, do not lose hope.

When I despair, Gandhi described, I remember that all through history, truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible. But remember, in the end, they always fall. Think of it. Always.

This is the Dharma. It's the teachings that the heart can be free no matter what. It's the teachings that you can trust that there's something bigger in this earth that you are a part of. There's a humility, not knowing the answers as Vinoba didn't, but being still and listening.

One of my favorite accounts is in the famous book *Black Elk Speaks*. Wilhelm Neihardt describes how Black Elk, now an old man at the end of his life, decided he had to go back up to the top of Harney Peak, where he'd had his original vision of the sacred hoop of the world that inspired his whole life. Neihardt describes how Black Elk put on his finest feathered headdress and painted himself. And step by step, in an old man's body, he climbed to the top of this peak. He went back to visit the place where he'd been blessed by a vision of that sacred hoop.

He held a sacred pipe and asked for a blessing, honoring the goodness and the beauty of the sacred tree he had seen. Neihardt had been told by Black Elk that if his prayer was heard, rain would fall, the sky would open—this was a signal that the Great Spirit had begun to listen and care.

The sky was perfectly clear that day. It was a hot and dry day amidst a season of drought, almost the worst in memory of the old ones in the community. Black Elk lay down holding the pipe and spoke as he could to the Great Spirit and asked, "If I have lived righteously, may I have the blessings of your rain."

And to Neihardt and those few around him, to their surprise, clouds began to gather, thunder rolled, and a light rain fell in the midst of the dry, hot, clear blue sky. Tears fell down Black Elk's cheek, and he knew that his life was not in vain.

If that doesn't bring humility, what can? Here, Black Elk, in the drought and the driest time, and the clouds come and say, "Yes, we bless you." Sometimes it takes only a little loving awareness to begin to listen.

There's a poem: "When someone listens deeply to you, it's like holding out a dented cup, one you've had since childhood, and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water. When it balances on top of the brim, you feel understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved."

Listen, dear ones. You've been training for this for a very long time. You've been training to be kind. You've been training to be present. You've been training to listen so you know how you can respond. *Sati sapaññ*a—listening presence, and then listening response.

When you listen, it's not really that complicated. As the Buddhist texts say: Others will be cruel—we shall be kind, thus we will incline the heart. Others kill—we will care for living beings, thus we will incline the heart. Others will speak falsehoods—we will speak the truth, thus we will incline the heart. Others will be envious—we shall be grateful, thus we will incline the heart.

Remember, you know how to live in a wise way. You know how to navigate the praise and blame, the gain and loss, the pleasure and pain, the beginnings and endings, the ever-changing impermanence of this human incarnation. All you have to do is listen deeply in your heart, to rest in loving awareness. To start with the loving awareness. To quiet the mind and tend the heart. To start with small things—that's where blessings begin.

And then you'll know when it's time to speak up, when it's time to stretch out a hand, when it's time to mend what you can touch, when it's time to be quiet and peaceful, when it's time to say no. All of these things.

I love the verse from Leonard Cohen's great anthem "Hallelujah"—what he calls the holy or the broken hallelujah—where he says: "Even though it all went wrong, I stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah." There's a song to listen to like your own heart.

I'm so grateful we get to share these teachings. I'm so grateful that we get to practice together. I'm so grateful that we have the dharma to help us navigate through the rapids of life—we would be otherwise, as Ajahn Chah said, like a boat without a rudder.

Quiet the mind. Take time. Tend the heart. Listen here in yourself. Listen to one another. Listen to the earth. You will know what to do.

Thank you, dear ones, for listening. Carry the spirit of whatever was valuable, or whatever reminded your heart, out into the world as you go now. If there were things that didn't resonate, just let them go. Trust yourself. Listen. Care. Rest in loving awareness and freedom that is yours.

CHAPTER 47

Monday Night Meditation: The One Who Knows

Jack Kornfield · 1h40

> *In this Monday night talk from Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield guides practitioners through a meditation on mindful loving awareness before exploring the concept of 'the one who knows'—a phrase from his teacher Ajahn Chah pointing to our innate capacity for awakened consciousness. Drawing from the Theravāda tradition's understanding of awareness as distinct from its contents, Jack invites us to recognize that while our bodies age and change, the consciousness witnessing these changes remains timeless.*
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> *The teaching weaves together insights from multiple wisdom traditions, including Nisargadatta Mahārāj's profound statement: 'Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. And between these two, my life flows.' Jack explores how expanding our 'window of tolerance' allows us to hold both the unbearable beauty and ocean of tears that constitute human experience. He shares stories from the Oslo Freedom Forum, where human rights activists learn to release the weight of collective suffering without abandoning their compassionate engagement.*
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> *Through interactive dialogue with practitioners struggling with fear, letting go, and parental attachment, Jack demonstrates how to work skillfully with difficult emotions—thanking fear for its protective intentions while recognizing we are larger than any passing state. The talk culminates in the essential question: 'Did I love well?' reminding us that our birthright is to see the world with the eyes and heart of a Buddha, planting seeds of compassion in a world that desperately needs awakened hearts.*

Thank you, Christina. How great to see you all. Some of you are old friends in the little squares where you live, apparently. That's where I get to see you and know you these days. And I'm really pleased to be able to be together again on this Monday night.

Spirit Rock started thirty-some years ago to create a sanctuary and a place for people to develop and understand the practices of mindful loving awareness, loving kindness, and compassion—and how to actually live and embody them in their lives. Over these years, we've had all kinds of trainings and classes, as Christina was pointing out, in many different forms. And I think one of the most important things is simply that we come together, that we sit together in meditation, that we remind each other of these values of compassion, these values of a courageous heart, the values and the capacity for inner freedom. We practice them, and somehow they spread from our own lives out in all the ways that we touch the world.

So with this, I'm really grateful to be back. And I would like us to start as we usually do with a period of meditation.

Let yourself find a way to settle. Let your body find a posture that's upright and at the same time comfortable, if that works for you—or whatever posture will keep you present and is inviting of your steady attention. Take your seat here, halfway between heaven and earth, as if under your own tree of enlightenment, your own Bodhi tree.

Let your body begin to settle. Take two long breaths, and with each one, let ease and relaxation grow. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle and release your neck for a simple uprightness. Let your shoulders relax, and your arms and hands rest easily.

Allow the body to settle in this seat, on this earth, in this amazing day. Feel the weight of your body, the contact with the seat beneath you—the buttocks or feet, legs—and sense how you can let go and be completely supported by Mother Earth beneath you. Steady. Stable.

Let your belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion. Allow the mind to quiet and match the softening of the heart. Come more fully into the present moment, resting under your tree of enlightenment as the Buddha that you are—the awakening one.

Now notice how the earth is breathing you. You don't actually have to do anything. Simply notice with gentle attention how the body breathes itself in this ocean of air. You might sense the breath as coolness in the nostrils, or swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or as the rise and fall of chest or belly. Feel how it breathes itself. Whatever rhythm it wants to take, let it do so. And with each breath, invite a sense of ease and calm.

As you quiet, sense the miracle of breathing. Your body is inter-breathing with the trees and the grasses around you. You breathe out carbon dioxide, which they breathe in. They breathe out oxygen, and you take it in. You're breathing with all life on earth. It is breathing you. You're breathing with the whales and with the breath of your ancestors. You're breathing with earthworms and pelicans.

Let yourself relax into the breath of life. Calm. Steady.

Notice that there are two different levels happening, two levels of experience. There's the feeling of the breath—this breath, the sensations in the body and movement, sound—each breath coming like a wave as the earth breathes you. And there is the knowing of the breath, the consciousness that notices and experiences the rhythm of the breath, slower or faster, the sensations.

There's the experience, breathing itself. And there is the mystery of awareness, of mindful loving awareness, that notices.

Rest in the stillness, settling and quieting. And of course, as you quiet and settle and feel the rhythm of breath, there will naturally arise other waves of experience.

Thoughts will come and go. Picture thoughts and word thoughts will come across the screen of awareness. Emotions will arise—restless, bored, anxious, happy, peaceful, steady—and all the sensations of the body and senses, waves of sound, tinglings in the body, warm and cool. In the middle is your awareness of this life breath, rising and falling, breathing in and out gently. Being breathed.

Let the mindful loving awareness now include the waves of experience that rise and fall around the breath—the longing or excitement or pleasure at settling, the tinglings or pain or throbbing in the body, the images of past and future, ideas, thoughts. You rest in the center with this breath and notice the waves as they come and go.

If it's helpful to stay present, you can gently name or acknowledge the stronger waves. As you feel the body being breathed, you can acknowledge sadness or excitement. You can acknowledge tingling, or hearing when sounds arise. You can acknowledge planning or remembering when thoughts come. As if to bow to them, you name them gently and feel them as a wave passing through the loving awareness, the mindful loving awareness that acknowledges as they arise, that notices and feels them—how long they last, how big they get—and notices as they pass away, how the body continues to be breathed, one breath after another.

And add in, if you wish, the quality of loving-kindness, so that whatever waves arise, whether painful or pleasant, thoughts or sensations or emotions, they're received with kindness. Pain is received kindly. Anger is received with kindness—thank you for trying to help me. Fear is received with kindness—thank you for trying to protect me. Longing and love, memory—when they arise, receive them with kindness. Oh yes, this too. This too.

And you are the mindful, loving awareness itself, the field of consciousness that receives and acknowledges, that bows to, that knows what arises as it arises and passes away.

And finally, if you are comfortable doing so, place one hand on your heart. Let yourself feel the gratitude that you've had this opportunity, that life has given you in this turning world the chance to pause and stop and listen deeply with the mind and heart and body, to be present and feel what benefit may have come and does come from doing this.

Welcome back. Please let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable and let yourself listen again—not so much to take notes or remember anything, but to quiet and listen and sense if there is something you are reminded of that matters to you, that you already know. And let that inspire you or touch you in any way it might.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about a phrase that my teacher Ajahn Chah used at times. He called it "the one who knows"—the wise or conscious, liberated nature of our own heart and mind.

It seems fitting. It's just about summer solstice. And of course, we could talk about carrying the inner light—though it's only solstice in the north; it's winter solstice for those in the south who are listening. But there's something timeless about carrying light: the light of understanding, the light of liberation.

And having it also be the week of Juneteenth, when the last major populations of enslaved people in America—two hundred fifty thousand human beings in the state of Texas alone, enslaved, a third of the population—were finally liberated.

So we'll talk about our own knowing and the understanding of liberation, inner as well as outer. The outer forms of oppression and racism and the ways that people have mistreated one another—they stem from the human heart. And the transformation that's needed for humanity at this time more than any is a transformation of the heart.

I run into people periodically as I travel and go about my work, who often will come up to me, those who know me, with warm greetings, thank-yous, different things like that. Commonly they will say, "If I didn't have the Dharma, if I didn't have these teachings, if I hadn't practiced loving-kindness, if I hadn't practiced mindfulness—going through what happened with my parents or my family or my divorce or the accident—I just needed these so much. They made a huge difference."

It's beautiful to hear. And of course, it's the purpose of the teachings: to actually offer these things that transform our lives and become part of who we are.

Zen Master Seung Sahn Soen-sa-nim, a Korean Zen Master whom I first met in 1972 when I'd come back from the monastery and was in Cambridge—he'd come from Korea a couple or a few years earlier and landed in Providence, Rhode Island, but also taught in Cambridge at one of the Zen centers there.

It was there that I met Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1972, that I met my beloved Trudy Goodman and Larry Rosenberg—and Seung Sahn Sunim, which means "respected teacher." He would do dharma combat, this way he had of teaching where he'd say, "All right, who wants to talk about what they know?" Trudy said I was quite brash after coming back from the monastery and would challenge things he said. He would always demolish me, but it took a few minutes, so it was kind of exciting.

One of the phrases he loved to use was, "You already understand." He was speaking to that deep part of you that knows—that knows wisdom, that knows how to live, that knows the mystery. Not by figuring it out, but by standing in its grace.

Over these fifty years of teaching, my approach has evolved. In the beginning, I taught more as a kind of authority: here's a dharma talk on the seven factors of enlightenment, or the practice of anapanasati and mindful breathing. But if you read the Buddhist texts, while the Buddha gave teachings in that form—as did some of my great teachers in Asia—he also engaged in a great deal of dialogue, a kind of Socratic dialogue.

Someone came to him and asked, "What happens when you die?" Instead of blurting out some answer, the Buddha said, "Well, why did you ask?" The person replied, "I want to know if I should live a moral life. Does it matter in the end?" A fair question. And the Buddha said, "Well, if there's a life after this one, how do you think it will be determined?" The person reflected and said, "Probably by how I lived. So if I live a moral life, it might lead to a better rebirth." Then the Buddha asked, "How about if this is the only life? How would you want to live?" The person reflected again and said, "Well, if this is my only chance, I guess I want to live my best life." Through this kind of dialogue, the Buddha didn't give an answer, but rather inquired together with that person.

This is a quality and way of interacting I've learned now—to be less of the authority, although, talk to my daughter, my wife, my friends, and I can pull off the authority thing too. But when people have questions, I'll ask them: What have you learned? What would the wisest part of you say in answering this? Or I'll ask: Where do you hold this in your body, and how do you hold it? That question, that concern, those emotions. Then I might turn to the people around and ask what others have learned about this

question. Something beautiful starts to happen in a group. The room becomes wise. It's not just one person—what have you learned? But what have others learned? And suddenly there's this shared understanding.

Some Buddhist texts begin with the phrase, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, you who are of the good families of the awakened ones"—which is your true history. What it means is that each one of you has the capacity to awaken, to remember dignity and freedom and love, and the nature of consciousness itself.

Robert Johnson, the celebrated Jungian author, writes about the shadow in the Jungian tradition—our worst fears and thoughts, the things we push away and don't make conscious, and what it means to see and learn about them. But he says, curiously, people resist the noble and positive aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide their dark sides. It's more disrupting to find out you have a profound nobility of character than to find out you're a bum. No slur on bums, by the way, but you know what he means with that metaphor.

So how do you live this? Rumi puts it simply: pay regular visits to yourself. It's what we started to do in our meditation tonight. And Lama Yeshe, that wonderful, great old Tibetan teacher from some decades ago, he looked at his students—he was very colloquial in his teaching—and said, "Hey, how many times do you check out what's in your refrigerator every day?" Then he asked, "How about checking out what's in your heart and mind as often as you look in the refrigerator?"

There's something about pausing and listening, as we did in our opening meditation. Taking the time to step back from our busyness and sense the mystery of being alive, and how we navigate it. Quieting down and asking: What wants attention? Because different things do. What wants understanding? And maybe, what wants love? You can reflect in yourself what wants attention and what wants love.

Of course, meditation is not just about getting calm and quiet. Those of you who've practiced for a while, especially Vipassana and mindfulness and mindful attention, know this. I remember Ajahn Chah in a BBC interview at his monastery saying, "Sitting is not just a sweet, calm thing to do."

Sometimes you're sitting in the midst of a raging storm—your grief, your fear, your anger, your concern for your life and the world and the grandchildren and the trees and everything else.

And so to sit, when we speak of the one who knows, is to expand what is called the window of tolerance. The one who knows says, "This is the human experience." It's the first noble truth of all the forms of suffering. Anybody not experienced that? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. And it's the third noble truth of the freedom in the midst of that suffering, of the end of suffering and the freedom beyond it.

And so you take your one seat in the middle of it all. You get the mundane problems of sleepiness—what one monastery I practiced in called "the poor man's nirvana." You don't judge it; you need it. You get restlessness and anxiety and fear, and you say, "Hey, fear, thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm actually okay right now. You can kind of calm down." As Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it seize in you as few ingredients can."

So you sit with it all. And at the same time, you sit with your joy and your dance, with the beauty of the world. You sit with your thoughts—as my friend Anne Lamott wrote, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone." So she sits in groups.

But you also sit with the cultural suffering, the cultural anxiety about climate change and political divisiveness and continuing racism and so many other dimensions that we carry. What happens as you sit is that you're able to shift from the cultural trance.

Here's a passage from John Gatto, who was the New York City Teacher of the Year: "Think of the things that are killing us and our children. Drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all—lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as if it gives a sense of meaning." He said this is what our kids are being taught in our schools.

But what happens as you sit is that you wake up. The opposite of the word "truth" in Greek is *alethe—alethe* means to sleep. And the word truth really means to wake up, to see the world as it is with its ten thousand joys, its magnificent beauty, and its ten thousand sorrows. To see our human lot in the midst of it. This is where the one who knows takes a seat. You look with the eyes of the Buddha and say, "Yes, this is our human lot." And you expand the heart to hold it all with kindness and compassion.

Then something very interesting happens. As you become the one who knows taking that seat, you shift from the content to see the process of life itself. "All things are impermanent"—the last words of the Buddha. And you start to see this. Even the big things—the cultural anxiety of divisiveness and climate, AI—they're all in change, and we don't know. We are in the middle of the story. You can't grasp and say, "This is the way it is and will be." The more you grasp things that change, you get rope burn.

Instead, you get the opportunity to see it with the eyes of an awakened one. Then you get to plant beautiful seeds in the midst of it. Yes, it's all impermanent. What can I do? If I hold on and get frightened, it creates more suffering—greed, hatred, fear, confusion. If I hold it with compassion and understanding, something entirely different is possible.

Now it's hard these days because there's so much insecurity. We don't know what's going to happen with climate or AI or with the person who's sick in our family or the healthcare system. It's not so much that humans are afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, writes one sage, but it's the place in between that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. We know where we were. We might look at where we're going. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer.

There's nothing to hold on to.

But what happens after we get to sit with the ten thousand joys and sorrows is that there also grows this capacity to see the whole dance of it in an amazing way.

Ariyaratne, who died a month or so ago—the great sage from Sri Lanka, a wonderful, amazing person, nominated for the Nobel Prize—in the middle of the Sri Lankan Civil War, he called all half a million of his followers together and laid out a peace plan that he called the Five-Hundred-Year Peace Plan. He said, "Not my lifetime, not yours. But we can plant seeds where we help one another in the villages, where we build roads, where we build schools, where we build love for each other. We learn each other's languages. And after ten and twenty and thirty years, we start to see how we're doing. Then we economically help the poorest rise up and join those who have more wealth." He laid out a whole process. He said, "Every hundred years we'll pause with a council and see how we're doing."

From this perspective of the process, as Martin Luther King said, the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And the vision of Ariyaratne—that five-hundred-year peace plan—was magnificent. We're part of something so much bigger. And the one who knows in us recognizes this.

I just got back from being invited to teach at the Oslo Freedom Forum, which takes place where the Nobel Peace Prize is given in Oslo. But instead of one person being celebrated, they bring together forty activists—human rights activists, all of them eligible for a Nobel Prize. They come and share stories and support one another. There's the older generation: the former head of the Cambodian government who was ousted by a dictator, or the wife of Navalny, or a minister who did receive a Nobel Prize. But then

there's this new generation of forty-year-olds and thirty-year-olds—these amazing human rights activists working to save the rainforests, working for justice around the world.

One woman came up to me who's been a huge figure in Latin America for saving the rainforest. She said, "Every time there's a huge new fire, the next day my menstrual period starts." There were people who came up to me who were Uyghurs working with a million Uyghurs who've been imprisoned in China, or people from Sudan and Syria. They said, "I have nightmares. It's so difficult. There's survivor's guilt." But the thing that most worried them was: "What about my compadres who are still in prison, even though I got out?"

Part of the work there that I was privileged to do was to say: there are inner practices. You don't need to carry the fires in your body. They belong to Mother Earth. She knows how to recycle them. You don't need to carry the prison in your heart. You can, as Nelson Mandela did when he walked out of Robben Island prison after twenty-seven years, say: they can imprison your body, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And so we did rituals and practices and trauma work and therapy—the things that would really help people. But it's not just them. All of us need to find our way to be the one who knows, to be the Buddha amidst this complicated and magnificent life.

Part of what happens is that the window of tolerance opens. We see the process of life—birth and death coming again and again and again. Then we set our directions. We plant seeds like Ariyaratne. There's suffering, and there's the overcoming of it. That was the passage of Helen Keller.

And then there's the invitation to step back, as we did in our meditation, and become consciousness itself. You know this. If you go look in the mirror, you'll notice you've aged. You lose fur in some places. Little wrinkles grow bigger. Your skin changes. Your body gets bigger or gets skinnier. It does all that stuff. It's aging.

But the weird thing is that you don't necessarily feel older. There's that feeling of: "Wow, look what's happened to my body. Whoa." And that's because it's only your body that ages. Who you are is the one looking in the mirror going, "Well, it's losing its hair, its fur, it's changing"—or the hair moves to some other place, all the weird stuff that happens. But behind that is this consciousness that's saying, "Wow, look at what's happening in this life. I guess we're more than halfway through. I guess we're headed on the downhill side of the roller coaster."

There is a perspective of consciousness itself, and you see it. You become the loving witness of it. Instead of getting caught in all these things, you become the one who knows.

As Walt Whitman wrote, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

But who is this one who knows?

If you turn back and look, it's like being in the movie theater and you realize that there's light and awareness itself. It's born into your body. It leaves your body when you die. This is who you are. You are awareness and consciousness. Loving awareness.

Years ago, I was studying with Nisargadatta Maharaj, the sage in Bombay. He used to teach that what we took to be ourself and our identity was not who we were at all. We're not our body. We're not our culture. You can honor your body and feed it and care for it—it's precious. You can value your ancestors and your cultures. But he'd look at you and say, "Do you think that's who you are?" You asked me, am I afraid of death? He said, "You think this body made of chapatis and lentils and curries—you think that I'm made of curries and lentils? It's just not me." And he said it with such conviction. He said, "Who I am is beyond space and time." This is consciousness itself, outside of time.

So I went and did a long retreat for a couple of months, and I did this kind of radical practice of starting with the heart and doing radial sweeping, coming back to the center of things, and then dissolving into emptiness. You know, when you have time and you're young, you do weird things. And I came back high as a kite. I flew back to Bombay and sat down with him. He peered at me as he peered at people who came, and he said, "Ah, you're back. What's up?"

And I said, "I'm not back. It's all a dream. It just appeared and disappeared."

Whoa—that was like baiting the bear or something. "What do you mean? What do you think you know?" And he tested me in different ways. I said, "No, no, it's all just a play of consciousness." I was way out there after two months of this practice of going from one to zero and back. "It's all just the play of light, of space and time, and that's just consciousness."

Finally he kind of got it. He looked at me and said, "Pretty good." And then he said, "So now no more fear, ever, right?"

That got me. I sort of frowned. I thought, "Oh, maybe I could be afraid again."

He said, "Go sit in the back. You haven't finished yet."

If I were wiser at that time—but of course we all could say that about whole vast chapters of our life—I would have understood what I now know and said, "Fear arises. So what? It has nothing to do with me." And then of course he would have tested me some other way.

But there's something so beautiful about seeing the way things are. And the one who knows realizes, as we breathe, as we practice—St. Francis de Sales put it this way. He said, "What's needed is a cup of knowledge, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience." And the patience is really timelessness. There's no quick fix for this life or for this globe. The one who knows acknowledges the way things are—the unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears.

Mary Oliver writes: "What can I say that I have not said before? I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there is an unfinished story, and you are somewhere in it, and it will never end until it all ends. Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce, but also take it to the forest. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still."

I am of years lived so far—seventy-four—and the leaf is singing still. And this is really the invitation from the one who knows: unbearable beauty, the ocean of tears.

The Dakini speaks. The Dakini is the feminine wisdom figure.

"My friends, let's grow up. Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here—or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice. Look, everything that can be lost will be lost. It's simple. How could we have missed it for so long? Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings, but please let's not be so shocked by them. Let's not act so betrayed, as though life had broken her secret promise to us. Impermanence is life's only promise to us. Let us watch as things die and as they are renewed."

So the one who knows this says, "Hey, human incarnation—pretty cool. Pretty horrible. Pretty wondrous." And it also sees that life doesn't unfold by accident. There are causes and conditions. What we practice makes the future.

Sharon Salzberg tells the story of how she was practicing some months of loving-kindness meditation in Burma, repeating over and over, "May I be well and safe," extending these wishes to other people and things. Partway through her practice, she'd gone to receive her food that was placed in her hand. She went back to her little cottage and dropped it all on the floor—the plate smashed, everything scattered. She said to herself, "Sharon, you're such a klutz," which is sort of how she had viewed herself. But then the next thought came: "Sharon, you're such a klutz, and I love you." She said, "Oh, this stuff works."

What seeds we plant, what we practice—it makes the difference. This is your birthright: to know that it's possible to practice love and generosity in this amazing human life, and to let it be playful.

People think of spiritual life as some grim duty. I exercise, I have a new diet, I work out, I'm studying a new language to keep my memory sharp—all this stuff you do, right? But Ajahn Chah had such a sense of humor. The Dalai Lama—you come to see him and half the time he'll put his hand on your cheek, or if you've got a big mustache, he'll kind of tug on it or play with you and just start to laugh. Ruth Denison loved to get people up to dance.

Here's a story for you. In 1969—a long time ago, right when I went into the monastery—right out of graduate school, I was drafted into the US Army. After I got new clothing, a haircut, and vaccinations, I filled out a stack of forms. One asked for my religion. Naturally, I was worried about going to Vietnam. I decided to choose a new religion for myself. Feeling rebellious, I wrote: "Druid (reformed)."

Two weeks later, I received my dog tags stamped with my name, social security number, blood type, and "Druid Reformed." I wondered how the army would administer last rites for that.

Stationed stateside several months before shipping out, I was looking forward to a big date on Saturday night when the commanding officer canceled all weekend passes. A large anti-war protest was scheduled, and he was afraid a lot of his soldiers would attend. But I was determined to go on that date with my girl.

Discovering there was to be a full moon that weekend, I requested a two-day pass to celebrate a religious holiday. The commanding officer was skeptical. "What the hell religion are you?" he asked. I told him I was a Druid and that the last full moon before winter solstice was our high holy day. He demanded to see my dog tags, so I showed them to him. He looked at them in stunned silence for a moment, then granted me the pass.

As I was on my way out, he said, "Wait a second—don't you guys kill goats?"

"No, sir," I said. "That's the Orthodox. I'm Reformed."

You've got to laugh. You've got to play in this.

The Taoist Zhuangzi writes: "If you're crossing the river in a boat and an empty boat collides with your own skiff, you will not be angry, you will not be shouting and hurt. You'll just push it away. But if there's someone in that boat, you'll shout at them to steer

clear, and you'll get angrier and angrier as it comes closer—all because there's somebody in the boat. But if the boat were empty, you would not be shouting, you would not be angry and upset."

If you can empty your own boat as you cross the river of the world, he says, no one will bother you and no one can truly harm you.

So there comes, for the one who knows, a sense of graciousness and generosity and ease, because what matters can't be taken from you. They can put your body in prison and you'll suffer. Believe me, these were people in Oslo. I was so touched because they'd willingly or unwillingly suffered for something that mattered so much to them. But in the end, what mattered was so much bigger than their suffering.

And this is your birthright—to see the world with the eyes of a Buddha, to see the whole of the world with the heart of the Buddha.

What matters in the end to the one who knows? There are really only a few questions at the end of life. Did I love well? Perhaps, did I learn to let go? Did I live fully? But did I love well is the question.

O nobly born, remember who you really are.

Nisargadatta again talked about this when he spoke about his own experience of freedom. "Wisdom tells me I am nothing—just the play of elements, the play of consciousness. And love tells me I am everything. And between these two, my life flows."

Here's Chief Seattle, and of course he meant to include women: "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man." And I got this when my daughter was in second or third grade. She said, "Daddy, I think you can use this in your talks." It's in her third-grade handwriting, so I treasure it.

But I'm also aware of Israel, Gaza, Palestine. When I was there doing peace work in Palestine and Israel, I met with the former combatants for peace—they're still going even today. I met with the bereaved mothers on both sides, the Jewish and the Arab, the Palestinian and the Israeli bereaved mothers. And they're all, in the end, just mothers. And it's still happening. This is not the end of the story. The violence is not the end.

The one who knows shifts from what's called the small self, or the body of fear, when we feel ourselves individual and separate from the world. We're afraid the heart can't bear it. We have to defend ourselves. But to open, as Hafez the poet says: "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions."

So you open. The one who knows says all of this can be held in the heart. For who we are is timeless awareness, loving awareness itself. Wisdom says, I am nothing, I am space. And love says, I am everything.

And this is not a philosophy. It's an experience, and something in you knows this and will know it when you die and you leave your body and go, "Wow, that was an incarnation. How about that one? Wonder what I learned from that one." Don't be afraid. Or you can be afraid, as Nisargadatta teased me, but don't be afraid of the fear. It's just another state.

Rilke the poet reminds us: ultimately, it is upon our vulnerability that we depend. The fears and confusions and the suffering of the world—they are to be experienced in this vast heart.

O nobly born, who you are is this knowing, is this deep wisdom.

Sometimes I suggest to people a practice: pretend you're enlightened. For the next week, just pretend. And see what happens. Maybe you won't even go back from that. "You already understand," said the Zen master.

Take a moment to reflect. Think of a situation that's difficult in your life—and your life is not just your body's life, but your life in the world, wherever it is. Imagine yourself as the wisest figure you could be. Imagine that you turned into Mother Mary or Buddha or Nelson Mandela—whoever it is. How would you respond if you were Mother Mary? How would you respond as an awakened one?

While it is not your task to fix the whole world—that would be hubris—you are charged in this human form to reach out and mend or touch the places that you can, from this wise and loving heart.

Continue to reflect. Not only is that wisdom within you, the wisdom of the awakened ones, but where are you called to reach out, to touch, to mend? You can know. As the poet says, "The earth is too small a star and we too brief visitors upon it to do anything but love."

You do know. You already know. You already understand.

In the question period that followed, a student named Toby shared this reflection:

"I have studied your work for many, many years. And now, as I'm really getting older—not just imagining it—I'm finding that it's become much more internalized, probably because of the practices. What I've noticed is that because I have very deep feelings about what's going on in the world, I've said to myself: then do something for the people you're able to reach. People are so needy to be seen and to be deeply heard.

"My practice is about having the courage to tell them what I see. I find that even those who are deeply grieving or frightened, when you hear them, when you say 'I heard you, I saw you, I know what this means'—you don't have to have a solution. What you have to do is have the connection.

"I grew up as an only child, and what I've come to realize is there's no such thing as an only child. We're all so deeply connected that we may be in a family configuration that pretends otherwise, but even our next door neighbor has changed that illusion.

"I can use what you've been teaching about the one who knows to remind myself that I'm never going to be perfect—that's not on the agenda. But I should take the risk. I should listen.

"It doesn't have to be anything dramatic. I was at the zoo the other day, and I had a long walk to get somewhere and didn't know how. A staff member in a car rode by, and I stopped him. Obviously he was very annoyed at being stopped. But I asked him for directions and he was very precise. And I just looked at him and said, 'Thank you. You were so wonderful.' This huge, radiant smile came over his face. And I thought: don't not do this."

It's really important. So whether it's in my volunteer work or just in my everyday life, I see it everywhere. Sometimes my husband laughs if we're at a restaurant and a waiter is wonderful. I'll say, "Would you like me to tell your manager?" And he says, "Don't move, don't move—he's right over there. I'll get him for you."

I think that's the one thing we can all do: for each person we interact with, if we see it, say it. The only thing I would add, and this is very serious to me, is that if you see that kind of beauty and wonderfulness in people, you also very often see the other side—and you have a great responsibility not to misuse it. That's a separate issue. You can just stick to what's really special.

So thank you, because without your teachings, I'd still be home thinking about whether I should do it.

Joseph: I am really touched by what you say, by your spirit. I wrote down "there's no such thing as an only child," because it's a profound revelation and you express it exquisitely. Not only is what you talked about and the way you're doing it inspiring, but the other thing you've communicated is that it's fun.

Student: It is. It really is. And you surprise a lot of people while you're at it.

Joseph: You get to be some combination of Wavy Gravy and the Dalai Lama—you're actually bringing some beauty and joy into all those interactions. And it's fun.

Student: And it also makes me happy.

Joseph: Ah, that too. Yeah, that too. So thank you so much.

Student: Oh, thank you, thank you.

Joseph: Pamela, would you like to unmute and come on?

Pamela: Hi. It's such an honor to be able to ask you a question.

Joseph: Sure.

Pamela: I'm grappling with a couple of things. I loved what you said about how you don't need to carry the prison inside your heart. I nearly lost one of my sons a year ago. I have twin boys and I'm a single mom. He's alive still, thank God, and healing. But he and his twin brother—I've always been the mom that did all the work, and I still do all the work. I manage a lot of medical stuff because he has a complex medical condition. And they're in this phase now, they're seventeen, where they want to spend more time with their dad than with me.

I'm really struggling. People keep telling me I need to let go, that they'll eventually come back to me. Our relationship is healing, but it's really hard. It's really painful. And I feel that I hold a lot of resentment and anger because I do so much every day—I'm constantly managing the doctor's appointments and this and that.

I don't want to hold that resentment because I want to do it. My ex said to me today, "Well, I'll make the appointment." And I said, "No, I don't want you to make the appointment. I got it. I'm handling it." But it's like... yeah. So I don't know if you have any words of wisdom.

Joseph: Thank you. Yeah. I'm a twin. Are your twins fraternal or identical?

Pamela: Fraternal.

Joseph: Are they quite different?

Pamela: Very. Very.

Joseph: Yeah, I was quite different from my twin brother. He was a football player, star of the high school play. I played oboe in the orchestra.

So it was just very different. But I can feel the tenderness.

"Yeah. You've said so many things. First of all, as we talk, let me ask, where do you carry the pain around this in your body?"

"I mean, in my heart, I guess."

"What's it feel like? Close your eyes and not trying to change it, just being gently attentive. What does this pain feel like? How big is it? What's its..."

"It's big. It's huge."

"Is it hot or cold? Is it trembling? Is it fiery? What is it?"

"It feels like a prison. There are things that have improved and I'm so grateful for that. But I'm so wrapped in fear of losing them, or them not coming back to me."

"Yes. So feel that. Feel the prison and the fear that after all you've done, your children won't love you and won't come back. Feel it. And let me ask, how do you hold it? How do you touch that? Do you wish it wasn't there? Do you try to push it away?"

"It's a mother's fear."

"Close your eyes. This is deep mother's pain, saying, 'I love them. And I just have to hold on to them because that's my job.' So you feel all of that. And now what happens if you hold that with compassion? Not trying to fix it, you're just loving and saying, 'I know how frightened you are, and I'll hold you kindly, and it's okay—you can feel all these things.' See what happens if you're kind to it. Does it like that?"

"Yeah."

"All right, so notice that. Now notice the next thing, as you listen and feel. There's something about trust. You think you're in charge because you've had to be for a long time, right?"

"Yeah."

"You're not really in charge much anymore."

"I know."

"Okay, let's take that in and see how that feels."

"It feels really crappy."

"It does, doesn't it? Because that means—who would you be if you're not in charge? Who's left? Tell me."

"I don't know."

"Yeah, so be with that don't know. There would be a tender place, and 'I've had this identity and I've had to fight for this identity in the lives of my twins.' Now, 'I don't know who I am.' They kind of don't want you to be that old person anymore. They're growing up, and even your ex is trying to do something, and you still want to be that woman. Now, if you were really kind to her, if the wisest part of you could speak to that woman... If Mother Mary and Quan Yin would say something to that woman who's worked so hard, what would they say?"

"I guess you have to move on to something else."

"So take a breath and then say that again—like the bodhisattva, the goddess of infinite compassion who knows the hearts of mothers—say it again."

"I guess you can take a break, but there are things I can't take a break on, you know..."

I think Mother Mary doesn't quite buy that. Yes, of course there are some things, but feel that. That's actually the part of you that's terrified to let go. Hold that with great kindness, because you've needed to have that. And say, "Thank you. Thank you. It'll be okay."

And it will, actually. It's not in your hands anymore.

"But one of them has a complex medical thing..."

Yes. And you do what you can, and you let your husband—your ex-husband—do some things. Maybe he won't do it as well as you, but he's their father. And you alienate them all, you know this, by clinging so much. How would they all respond if you let go of some?

"They'd be happy."

This is the one who knows. They'd be happy. Could you be happy?

"I guess."

That's a very soft, tender, sweet "maybe."

"All right..."

Well, you see, you already know. You already understand. And it's hard. But you actually have to become somebody different than who you identified with in your role—which you needed to be. And you need to say thank you to your heart, your strength, and your body for doing it. But basically, the game's over now for that part. You've got to be a different kind of parent. And they'll be happy, and you'll be happier eventually.

"Thank you so much."

Thank you. I'm so touched. I feel how deep your love is. Now it's time to match that deep love with the wisdom that you carry.

"Thank you."

Do we have time for another question? One more.

I want to add something. As we were ending that exchange, I found myself wishing I'd had her imagine that Quan Yin or Mother Mary—whoever resonates—could wrap their arms around her and say, "We understand. We understand that you could feel that." Because it's not just you, it's all mothers, right? And these great beings have all been mothers. They would say, "It's okay. We've all done this. And we've also all learned to let go."

Thank you. Okay. Let's see who comes next.

Todd, would you come on and ask your question or make a comment?

"Yeah, Jack. So I'm not so much a father right now as a grandfather. I also have two wonderful sons who I'm still in their lives. One has two sons, and I have a third grandson. He's almost three, and my wife and I spend a lot of time taking care of him. He is just the most amazing, joyful little guy. And my oldest grandson is about to graduate high school tomorrow night."

Wow.

And he was a great athlete. Like you said, your brother was the football player—he was a great basketball player and baseball player. And I watched his every game since he was five and worried and worried every single game. I couldn't even enjoy it because I'm a worrier. And I worry about my grandson—he's such a bundle of joy. He has his meltdowns and I worry about him.

So you started this whole thing by saying that people come up to you and say, "I really need the Dharma." And I really need it, really need it too. I've been following you for many, many years. I've taken—you don't know me, but I shared a little bit once with you here. I've been doing the stewardship thing on Monday nights for a few months now. And I really need this. I'm not new to it. I've been doing various spiritual practices for fifty years. But for me, it's so much more just the hope that I could go past all this.

A lot of fear as I get older. Fear of old age, sickness, and death—all that stuff. A lot of fears. It's hard for me to enjoy my life because I'm so fearful. And unlike the woman who just shared, things are actually going really well. I haven't had bad things happen. Everything's going well. I have this wonderful marriage—I've been married for fifty-two years—and I have a wonderful family. They're all doing well. But I worry so much about all of it. And for me, the Dharma that I need so much is more just the hope. Just to be in these conversations, a hope that somewhere there is less suffering.

Okay. So, question. What is the benefit of all that fear, having it go for so long? What do you get from it?

Nothing. It's bad.

Yeah. Okay. So that's a reflection for you, for yourself. Because I think when we cling to things—I mean, some of it is that your body's on alarm and you've got fight, flight, or freeze going all the time. So there's a physiological part. But also, it's familiar. You're comfortable with it. This is how you navigate the world. And hopefully the world has been okay because you've been worrying about it. And if you didn't worry about it, maybe it would fall apart. Maybe it needs you to sit on the sideline and worry the whole game, and that makes it go better or something like that. I'm not quite sure what it is.

So yeah, close your eyes for a moment. And tell me, as you tune in, where do you carry the worry and fear in your body?

It's all in my stomach.

It's in your stomach. What's it feel like?

Just tight.

Tight.

"So bring a kind attention to it, almost like you were holding a child who was frightened and curled up in a ball and scared. You're just going to hold them kindly, as if to reassure them in some way. That holding gives us a sense that they're recognized, they're held, that something bigger can hold them. Notice what happens as you hold it kindly. See if anything happens. Just be curious. Does it like it?"

"Well... in this moment, it feels a little better doing that. But it's kind of like I know that it's not going to be like this tomorrow."

"Slow it down. In this moment, stay with it. Keep your eyes closed."

"It feels good. But then the worry comes in and says, 'Yeah, but that's BS. I'm coming. My channel is full tilt open. And as soon as this is done, I'm coming back on.'"

"But first, stay right where you are. To actually pay attention and bring kindness to it soothes, it softens, it opens. Now, imagine that you could take that worry—for the moment, we're just playing with it—and put it in the lap of some great spiritual figure, like the Buddha or the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Whoever you choose—that's just mine, but it could be anybody. And say, 'All right, I've got so much worry and I know it doesn't really help so much. Will you carry it for me?' Imagine that you were to put it in the hands of the wisest and most loving being that you could imagine and say, 'Would you hold this for me for a little bit?' And see what it would be like in your imagination to take it outside of your body and place it in the lap of this wise being who said, 'Yeah, I hold a lot of stuff. It'll be okay.' Notice what happens."

"I'm not sure that if I say I'm noticing something, I would be honest. I feel like I should say something."

"No, you don't have to. What you're noticing is that that doesn't work for you."

"Yeah. It's just still there."

"Right. Okay, so put two hands on your belly. We'll go a different route. Okay, and say, 'I understand you're trying to keep me safe. Thank you. I understand you're trying to keep me safe and the people I love safe. Thank you.' Because that's what it's trying to do. 'Thank you. You've been working really hard to keep me safe. Thank you.' And now say the next thing: 'In this moment, with my eyes closed, listening, talking with Jack—in this moment, I'm okay. In this moment, you can relax a little bit. It's okay.' As you thank it and say, 'Thank you for doing so much. You can relax. It's okay.' And notice what happens."

"It feels better. It softens."

"Okay. One more question. What does the wisest part of yourself—the advice from the wisest part of your being—want to say?"

"That there is hope in these practices to get beyond this fear."

"Yeah. And it's not that you're going to get rid of the fear."

But you can notice even now, when you said, "Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay right now. Thank you for keeping me safe"—the fear is there, but who you are is bigger than that fear. You're this part that's wise and witnessing and compassionate. You can say, "Yes, I know you've been helping me. Thank you." And I'm okay. A bigger part of you can say, "I'm okay." So you don't have to get rid of it, but you become someone larger and wiser—which is who you are.

"I'm going to add this one about 'thank you.' I have many practices that I try to put into my mind all the time, many things that come from you and many other Buddhist teachers. And I'm going to add this one—thank you. Thank you for the fear."

Remember to put your hands on your belly when you do it, on your gut, and say, "Thank you. I'm okay just now. You can relax somewhat. And thank you for taking care of me." Really make it a physical practice because you can't just do it in your head. You have to feel it and do it in your body.

You're a good dad. You're a good grandfather. You're a good human being. So things are okay. And you will die—it's true. You'll get old and sick and you'll die. And everybody does. Not a problem. This Ajahn would say, what do you think? You think that's not natural? You'll be fine. Your job really is to love. And you have so much of it. So much care comes out of you. And now you can even love the fear and say, "Thank you. We'll be okay."

That was the last question for this evening. Thank you all for attending. Thank you for your good hearts. The world needs us to wake up, needs human beings to care in a whole bigger, more wonderful way. And we can only do that together. There's no such thing as an only child—I love that expression. So brothers, sisters, siblings, take care of yourselves this week. The summer solstice, Juneteenth, celebration of freedom—let it be inner and outer.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for your good hearts. The world needs us to wake up, needs human beings to care in a whole bigger, more wonderful way. And we can only do that together. There's no such thing as an only child—I love that expression.

So brothers, sisters, siblings, take care of yourself this week, the summer solstice, Juneteenth, celebration of freedom. Let it be inner and outer.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 48

The Laughter of the Wise: Emptiness and Form

Jack Kornfield · 1h37

> *In this profound Monday night teaching from Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Jack Kornfield addresses how we can navigate these turbulent times—political division, climate change, wars, and personal struggles—without becoming overwhelmed or disconnected. Drawing from the Heart Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya), he illuminates the paradoxical teaching that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, not as abstract philosophy but as lived experience that can liberate us from grasping and anxiety.*
>
> *Kornfield weaves together wisdom from multiple traditions: the Diamond Sūtra's (Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra) teaching on impermanence, Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha listening to the river's thousand voices, Zen master Seung Sahn's "don't know mind," and the Bhagavad Gītā's secret of acting without attachment to results. He shares the teaching of his master Ajahn Chah, who learned from Ajahn Mun that all experiences—even profound insights—are merely waves passing through awareness. The essential question becomes: to whom do these experiences happen?*
>
> *The talk offers practical wisdom for engaged spirituality: becoming "make-weights" who tip the scales toward justice, planting seeds without knowing when they'll sprout, and embodying the paradox T.S. Eliot expressed as learning "to care and not to care." Through stories of Aikido master Morihei Ueshiba, Sri Lankan sage Ari Ratana, and Father Greg Boyle's work with gang members, Kornfield demonstrates how resting in loving awareness allows us to act with both fearlessness and tenderness—laughing with the wise while weeping with the grieving.*

And Spirit Rock, of course, not only welcomes you, but we have beautiful retreats on the land. And now that we're open again, more or less post-COVID, I can't recommend enough what happens when you come on a silent retreat in this beautiful valley.

So what we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We meditate or sit with a little bit of guidance for about half an hour or so, then take a break, stretch or relax for five minutes. And then there's some teachings and time for questions and dialogue.

Whatever brings you, it's a pleasure to welcome you wherever you are in your life—both geographically, emotionally, communally. All parts of you are welcome, all of your rather extraordinary web of life now invited to come into the present here, this moment with one another and yourself.

So let's sit together, if you would. Please let yourself find a way to settle. Let your body be stable, supported, and also at ease. You don't have to get into any weird posture to do this. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it from your meditation.

And once you find yourself settled, if you're comfortable, let your eyes close gently, or at least leave them downcast. Take two or three long breaths and bring the mind and body and heart together just here in the reality of the present—which is all we really have. The rest is just thoughts of past and future, but here, just where you are.

Let yourself begin to open to the reality of the present, to your experience. It's helpful to relax the body somewhat. Let your eyes and face be soft.

Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle and release your neck. Let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the seat, wherever you are, and how gravity pulls you to mother earth—and how, at the same time, the earth completely supports you. You can relax just where you are, just where you're seated. Let the belly be soft, the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

And now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of being alive, just here and now. Notice how the earth, how life itself, is breathing you. You don't even have to do it. You're being breathed. And each breath, in and out, breathes together with the trees and the grasses, with the cats and dogs and wolves and octopus and all that lives. We're all breathing together. Feel it, and relax into it. You can rest and trust in the breathing.

As you bring your mindful, loving attention to the body breathing itself, very kindly invite the quality of calm and steadiness, of ease. You can even whisper it as the body breathes itself: *Calm. Ease.* Let the breath settle, and the whole energy of being come to rest here on the earth, in this moment. Calm and ease, inviting a sense of relaxation, graciousness with each breath.

You don't have to make the breath do anything. Let it have its own life, its own rhythm. Sometimes short. Sometimes longer. Sometimes loose and easy. Sometimes constricted. Sometimes slow. Or faster. Let it breathe itself, and you are the loving awareness, resting in ease and calm as the breath breathes. Steady, kind attention, just noticing. Resting in a calm, mindful, loving awareness.

You can also begin to notice all the waves of experience that rise and fall around the breath. Sometimes you'll feel the breath very directly. And sometimes a wave of thoughts—plans, concerns, issues, memories—will rise up. And as you notice that wave, you can even name it gently: *thinking* or *planning, imagining, remembering*. And let it rise and fall. You don't have to surf it or go anywhere with it. You just notice it. And then again, feel the breath, how it breathes itself in the midst of it all.

And just as your mindful and loving attention can feel the breath breathing itself, and can notice the waves of thoughts that come and go around the breath, notice too the emotions and feelings: sadness, excitement, longing, frustration, sweetness, peacefulness, joy. And when the feelings become like strong waves, let go of the breath as your focus and name them gently: *sadness, sadness* or *excitement, excitement*. Feel it as a wave of energy. Just as the breath breathes itself, so the feelings arise and fall like waves of the ocean. And the breath breathes itself in the middle of it all. Relaxed, gracious and easy.

You are the mindful, loving awareness that notices the breath coming and going, that notices waves of thoughts and feelings as they rise for a time and pass away, that notices too the ever-changing field of sensations, which is how you experience the body and senses. And like the breath that breathes itself, the tingles and vibrations, the warm and cool, the contractions and opening—the whole field of sensations floats in the mindful, loving awareness, the space of awareness itself.

Relax. The breath breathes itself. You simply notice, calm and steady. The waves of thoughts and emotions, the sensations of the body—they rise and fall around the breath like waves of the ocean. And you are the space of loving awareness: open, gracious, steady amidst it all.

From this quiet place, you can ask what wants your loving attention. You can know what in the body, in the heart, in the mind calls to you. And as you allow yourself to listen and know, let the loving awareness become compassion and kindness. For you know what to do and how to respond. You are the wise one. Steady. You are awareness itself.

So tonight, as usual for these teachings, I'd like you to sense them more as a reminder or a reflection or a meditation—just to let yourself listen and sense what feels true to you, what's helpful and what's not. Toss out what doesn't serve you, let it go. The whole point is to actually communicate and touch each other's hearts and minds in ways that benefit, and let the rest disappear.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the laughter of the wise, about the nature of emptiness and form. So it's a little bit of a deeper talk, if you will, than some others recently. Often I've been teaching about the Bodhisattva and the commitment to serve this world from the awakened heart. Tonight is a different perspective on the understanding of wisdom.

It's pretty wild times out there. And of course, the question for us is how do we navigate? How do we hold this? There's the changing political landscape that's really dramatic. Divisiveness in politics and elsewhere. There's climate change. There's continuing racism and injustice. There's wars—Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, and other places. Plato said, "Only the dead know the end of war." Hard to say, but it pretty much describes my experience in seventy-nine years of this world. There's refugees. There's all the kinds of struggles in our communities.

How do we navigate? We want to help. We want to make a difference. We offer money. We offer our time. But also, it's overwhelming.

There's an African story about a village alongside a river. When the river rose and flooded much of the village, one man was sitting on a rock by the edge of the torrent of water. The hands sticking out of the river were his sister, his mother, his daughter, his brother, his wife—and he could only reach for one or two hands. That's tough, isn't it? But it also maps a little bit where we are. You want to help somewhere and you can, and it's a beautiful thing. But what about all those other hands reaching out?

Take a pause here. This is our human predicament in samsara, in this world.

And so we sit in meditation. Yes, in part for stress reduction—mindfulness-based stress reduction, as Jon Kabat-Zinn called it. And we need that.

And the sitting we just did was beautiful. But the word Vipassana also means to see clearly—to see our own mind and heart, to see the ways that we get entangled, to see the ways we get free, and to see the same in the society around us: the entanglements and the possibility of liberation.

When we see clearly, we see suffering and we also see joy. And as we see clearly, we can foster the causes that increase wellbeing and happiness, and release those that cause suffering. But we have to stop and look, and look around, both deeply in ourselves.

Yesterday I was out on my deck watching the shimmering nearly full moon that did look like a round cheese near the horizon. It had that nice cheese-like yellow color. Remember as a kid, you were told that's what it was made of? And over the lagoon, I felt somehow how that same orb, that little planet that circles ours, was also being seen at

different hours this same day in Jakarta and Johannesburg and Jamaica and Jerusalem. We're all on this little blue globe floating in a vast sea of space, circling around our star with another little globe circling around us. And it's pretty mysterious when you pause and you look.

Even if your circumstances are easy—the economics of your life, the class, the caste, the geography, wherever you are—even if you're somewhat easy and blessed, you can't really be at ease. Because as Archbishop Tutu says, when someone asks, "How are you?" in South Africa, he said, "We always answer in the plural. We are well, or we are not well." He said, because we're so connected. If I say we are not well, it's because my grandmother is sick or my brother had an accident. And you asked me, how are you? And I say, we are not so well. You understand what I'm saying? Because you know this, that there's suffering. Parents who can't feed hungry children, thousands of refugees in Sudan, thousands and thousands, refugees all over—there is suffering. And no matter how much we might remove ourselves, it touches us because we're not separate. We have to say we are well or not well together.

How do we hold this? Suffering isn't the end of the story.

In the course of this hour or two that we gather together, there are Bodhisattvas doing extraordinary work to care for others. And there are ordinary Bodhisattvas. In one or two hours, there will be 2.6 billion acts of kindness. Parents putting tortillas and cassavas and oatmeal and rice and Cheerios on the breakfast table for children. People who open the door for another, who pass each other with a sense of kindness. That's also who we are. Yes, there is suffering, but it's not the whole story and not even the end of the story.

So let's take this reflection a little bit deeper. The most recited verse in the Mahayana Buddhist temples, especially the Zen but elsewhere too, is the Heart Sutra. And it begins with Avalokiteshvara there on Vulture's Peak, offering teachings, having been asked by the Buddha to awaken all to what is called the perfect heart, the heart of perfect wisdom.

And Avalokiteshvara begins: Form is not different from emptiness. And emptiness is not different from form. That which is form is emptiness. And that which is emptiness is form. Feelings, perceptions, thoughts, memories, experiences—all things.

What is emptiness? It's a little bit like a fish saying, "What is water?" And here's the remarkable thing. Do you know what fish are made of? They're made of water. Everything that makes all these sharks and squids and urchins and all the amazing

things that we see in the ocean actually is a consolidation, thanks to DNA and all kinds of miraculous things—it is water taking new forms. So the fish say, "What's water?" And it turns out they are water.

So what is emptiness? If the fish says, "What's water?" and we say, "What is emptiness?" Emptiness is taught as a liberating teaching. Because as we look at our life, we're busy worrying, planning, concerned, remembering, trying to organize.

And these days I meet people with a tremendous amount of anxiety and worry. When you quiet the mind and look more deeply, then you start to see that you can't figure it out with your mind in the way that you try to. Because you want to figure it all out and make it safe for yourself. That's what the mind does—it's sort of a safety machine. Let me anticipate and get through this as best as I can and minimize trouble.

But you all know that story of the Chinese horse, right? There is this prosperous farmer. He gets married, he has his son, and everyone says, "Fantastic, he's so fortunate!" Not only does he have a farm, he's got some horses, and he has a boy, which in China was a special thing. But then a wild horse got interested in the horses that the farmer had and came sniffing around, and they caught it. The son caught it and brought it in. And now the farmer had three horses, and everyone said, "He's so lucky! He's got a boy, he's got three horses."

And the young man then decided to break in the horse. He was riding it and he fell and broke his leg. And now everyone said, "Oh, he's so unfortunate. He had this beautiful horse that came, he had this son, and now he fell and broke his leg. Who knows how he'll be limping. How unfortunate." Three weeks later, the local warlords came through town, taking all the young men off to battle—but the farmer's son couldn't go because his leg was broken. And they said, "Oh, he's so fortunate now." And I could go on with the story. You don't know. I mean, it's extraordinary.

And what this speaks to is called the wisdom of uncertainty—or by Zen master Seung Sahn, he called it "don't know mind." The mind that's open, that's not so rigid, that doesn't worry. "I know what's gonna happen in this election." Well, guess what? In one week—a terrible assassination attempt. And assassinations are horrible and they change the course of history like that. The stepping down of the current president. It was just one tiny little week in the wildness, and you thought you knew.

So emptiness—it's not a philosophy, but it's more tuning you to the experience of the way that life is.

"For years and years, I struggled just to love my life," wrote Mary Oliver, the poet. "And then the butterfly spoke, don't love your life too much, as she rose weightless in the wind." Don't hold on too tight. So much in that poem—the struggle to love oneself, but to do so not by grasping.

Because think back. Remember when you were a teenager? And all the opinions and views and hurts and longings and love and struggles. And then your twenties and your thirties, and it all seemed so real at the time. And then your life passes—oh wow, middle school, I remember that. That was like a different incarnation. Relax, baby. This is a journey. It's not something to hold on to.

So back to that river—the African River. Now we're at a different river, the river Ganges. And the Buddha walks along with a group of monks and nuns. And he says, "See the bubbles that float on the edge of the Ganges River?" And they said, "Yes." And he said, "Those bubbles are your thoughts, your feelings, your experiences, your days. They appear, they're there for a while, and they're gone. This is the nature of things."

Or as the Diamond Sutra says: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow—things appear and they disappear. And you know this. It all dissolves.

What happened to Y2K?

It's back with the dinosaurs, with the triceratops and the trilobites. What happened to the Mayan Empire and the Aztec and the Roman and Kublai Khan? They were magnificent. Gone. Ozymandias—all gone, you know?

Notice, it can all change in a moment. An earthquake, a comet, an assassination—we hope not—a volcano. All these things. This is the nature of samsara. We tend to feel it's so solid, but it doesn't last. This is part of the mystery of emptiness—that things are here and then they're not here.

And you know who that includes? As Miss Piggy would say, *moi*.

In the Mahabharata, it speaks about the great mysteries of life. And at one point it says, among the mysteries, here is one of the greatest of all: that human beings can see people die all around them and think that it won't happen to them. We kind of know it, but when you get the diagnosis and it's near the end, you go, "Whoa, I sort of expected it, but not so soon. Not like this, not like everything."

It's like the very rich man who died, and people in the neighborhood were saying, "Well, how much did he leave?" And somebody who was kind of wise said, "Why, everything, of course. That's what you leave. You leave it all."

So as you sit in meditation, yes, you can quiet, there's stress reduction, but it's not an errand to get somewhere. And it's not a grim duty. It's a pause in the mystery of life, because it all seems so solid. And yet when you quiet and notice, there's waves of pleasure and anticipation and planning and anxiety and remembering. There's waves of tension in the body and softening. There's all kinds of insights. But when you step back, the insights themselves and all the thoughts and feelings that come—they start to become like waves of the ocean. And that's what life is. You're on the shore, and the waves come in and out.

Here is a reading from your high school days. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, now at the end of his journey. He was listening deeply, and he sat by the river where he was learning from the ferryman:

He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything. He felt he had now completely learned the art of listening. He'd often heard all this before, all the numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer separate the different voices—the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation, the groan of the dying. They were all interwoven, entwined in a thousand ways, and all the voices and goals and yearnings and sorrows and pleasures, good and evil—they were the music of the world, the stream of events. And when Siddhartha listened to this river, to the song of a thousand voices, when he did not grasp just one—the sorrow or the laughter—but heard them all, the whole, then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: harmony, perfection, the laughter of the wise.

And you sit, and your life becomes pixelated. You see the screen and then moments of thoughts and moments of sensation and vibration of the body and sounds. The more closely you attend, the more it becomes vibrations. It dissolves. Again, the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in the summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, and a dream.

And it is dreamlike. You'll see when you die and float out of your body, and there's this like, "Wow, that was a trip, that incarnation. Amazing. Look at that." You'll see. You don't have to believe me. Just wait.

So the point, if it's a dream, is what? The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. The question isn't the next election cycle. The question isn't the resolution of this war or that. It's a recognition of something so profound—the dance of eternity, the play of consciousness. And instead of being confused and depressed and anxious and all those things, you can step back and say, "Wow, look at samsara."

What a dance, baby. What a dance.

And as Siddhartha said, with all the joys and sorrows and groaning and sweetness, all of it—this is the river of life. It's how it is. And it is like a dream because you can't find 2023. It is gone. In fact, you can't find June. You can't find July 19th. It's gone.

And so what do you do? Where do you rest? Yes, there's a wisdom of insecurity.

My teacher Ajahn Chah went to see the greatest master of the day of the forest monasteries, Ajahn Mun, and he told him about all the experiences he'd had—the insights and light and dissolving his body and understanding impermanence and seeing the forms of suffering, and what it meant to live in this way and that, and the images that could come. Ajahn Mun listened and said, "Chah, you missed the point. These are just experiences. You're sitting there, it's like you're in the movie and there's a Western and a documentary, a nature movie and there's a romantic comedy and there's a war movie. You're seeing all these movies, but there's only one question: To whom do they happen? Who's watching the movies? Turn your attention back and become the awareness itself, which is what you really are. You are consciousness."

Now, if you want a little hint, go look in the mirror—I like to say this—and notice that you've aged. Get real about it. The hair turns different colors or just vanishes like it can. The wrinkles appear, your body changes. And you have this experience—it doesn't matter, you can be in your 20s or 30s and have it—that you look a bit older or a lot older, but you don't feel older. You know that experience? Why is that? Because it's only your body that's aged. But the consciousness, which is what you are, is timeless.

And so you look and you say, "Whoa, look, it's lost its fur. It's sagging here. It's doing what it does." But that's not who you are. And you know that in a moment. You might rue it and say, "Gosh, I wish I had all that luxurious hair I had when I was a teen." But that's not the deal. You realize that you just rent the body from Hertz. Then you have to turn it in again, or whoever rents it to you. Your karma rents it to you, maybe.

But what happens is you become the witness to it all. You become the consciousness. And you get kicked into it sometimes—when there's an accident, when there's a diagnosis, when you take psychedelics, when something shocking happens. You go, "Whoa, I forgot. This is like a dream, it's changing. Anything could happen." The solidity starts to break apart.

And what happens instead is you become a loving witness of it. As Sri Nisargadatta, my teacher in Bombay, said, "When you understand, you will realize as I do: wisdom says, I am nothing." You're not separate from it all. You're just a play of consciousness, not who you think you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. And love says, I'm everything. That is all.

And this isn't a philosophy—it's actually an experience.

Many of you know this from the times when you've gotten quiet and something remarkable or difficult happened. And you go, "Oh, wow, it's not quite how it seemed—this solid." Who are you? There's the question.

We have so many things that we identify with, that we identify ourselves with. I'm a man or a woman. I'm a son or a daughter. And when you're in the room with your parent, you're a son or a daughter—that's who you feel yourself to be. I'm a sister or a brother. I'm a teacher sometimes. A student when you listen. I'm young-ish. I'm old. I'm gay or straight or trans or non-binary. I'm a Republican or a Libertarian or a Democrat or something else. I'm black, I'm brown, I'm yellow, I'm red, I'm white.

Forget it. All those identities need to be honored and respected, but that's not who you are. That's just your body. Those are the roles that you play at different times. I'm the boss. I'm the worker. I'm the social change agent—wonderful. I'm also at the effect of the society at large. Who you are is so much bigger than you think you are. Those are all just costumes you put on for a certain moment.

My dear friend Ari Ratana, who is the great sage of Sri Lanka and the best community organizer in all of Asia, during the long civil war in Sri Lanka between the Hindus and the Muslims and the Buddhists—he was a Buddhist elder, but really a celebrated elder, and he used his home to shelter some of the Muslim leaders from the Tamil Tigers.

One day, the military came to his door and knocked on it, people in uniform. His daughter opened the door, his teenage daughter, I think fifteen. They said, "Where's your father?" She said, "He's not here." They said, "We know you're harboring people. We want to come in and see who you have in the house." She said, "My father wouldn't

allow you to do so, but he's not here." They looked at her and said, "Where's your mother? We need to talk to her and come in." She said, "My mother isn't here either, and she wouldn't allow you to come in."

Then they said, "We need to come in." And she looked at them and said, "This is what my father would say. And I say it to you: you will have to kill me first before I will let you come in or harm any of these people."

Imagine—a teenager. But his spirit was so strong and so beautiful that it lived in her. You are bigger than you think you are. You're not these small roles. You undertake them, but you also have a huge heart. The real you is loving awareness and joy, and you can use it and embody it.

Thich Nhat Hanh says we're just playing hide and seek, all these roles. Sometimes I'm the girl on the refugee boat who throws herself into the sea after being raped by the sea pirate. And sometimes, he goes on, I'm the sea pirate with no compassion in my heart. I am all of these. And I weep as I tell you this.

"If only it were all so simple," said Alexander Solzhenitsyn. "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously

committing evil deeds, and it were necessary just to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being—and who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. You are *ariya ratana*—you are the noble one.

Yes, it's all tentative. It's all constructed in some kind of remarkable way. It appears, it's like a dream. Why care, then?

Because as you become the loving witness of it all, as you rest in consciousness, that wisdom brings tenderness. The Heart Sutra goes on, after saying "Form is emptiness and emptiness is not different than form—it all evaporates, it's not solid"—then it goes on to say: "And form is form, and emptiness is emptiness." This is the paradox. The form is also form. And we live in this extraordinary paradox.

Marpa, one of the greatest of ancient Indian-Tibetan sages, talked about the emptiness of all things. And then his grandson was killed and died, and he wept uncontrollably for a time. His students said, "Master, you told us it was all empty." And Marpa looked back and said, "Yes, and the death of a child is one of the most intense emptinesses you will experience." And he continued to weep.

This world—it's filled with unbearable beauty and blazing love and an ocean of tears. But it's the only place that I know of in all the circling galaxies where you can fall in love, where you can eat baked Alaska, where you can see an anaconda and an octopus. Not only can you fall in love, but you can break your heart too. Where else can you do this but in this earthly realm?

And I have to say, one of the most improbable things for me, and one of my favorites, is fireflies. I mean, think of it—let's have some bugs and put little blinking lights on them. Come on! How did this happen? It's so remarkable.

And yes, there's the ocean of tears, and there's the innocence of children that can't be taken away. If you watch young children run around, or you watch puppies and kittens and otters and wolf cubs—amazing. They play, there's a kind of innocent joy, a wonder, a beginner's mind, because this earth, the form of it, keeps recreating itself. And you get to be the witness of it in this time, in this incarnation—and probably quite a few more times. So you hang out, you'll see.

So why care? Because where else can you eat baked Alaska? And where else can you feel that profound tenderness when you look in the eyes of another being—whether it's the tenderness of love or the tenderness of compassion—because you're all connected.

So you realize emptiness and the inevitability of suffering. Anybody not seen that? Please raise your hand. You know, it's vast. But so is the innocence of children and the wonders of every forest and ocean.

And so how do you function? You function in a different way. I was showing some martial arts movies to a friend of mine who's a martial artist—films of O Sensei, Ueshiba Morihei O Sensei, the founder of Aikido. He was this tiny little guy, four foot nine inches, with a white patriarchal beard. He would invite the great martial artists of that time in Japan to come and see his art demonstrated.

In one scene I watched, he was surrounded by twelve or thirteen big guys—masters of judo and karate and other martial arts. And he said, "Okay." He said, "When I signal, bring it on."

He stood there, he signaled with a nod, and they moved in to attack him. And the strange thing is, it's like watching Obi-Wan Kenobi—he turned in a circle and they all fell down. Their eyes were wide with bewilderment: what happened? I watched it many times. How could this be? But his chi, his energy—and he said it's the energy of love, really, that doesn't allow harm to happen. Come on, bring it on. And they all fell down, these big, hulking, great martial artists.

How do you function the more that you're empty, the more that you're not so attached? Oh, I'm so attached to the politics and to the struggle, to the peace work which I love and I've been doing for decades. But the more you attach to it, the more you suffer. T.S. Eliot says it this way: teach us to care and not to care. Relax. Make space. Become gracious like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu in that beautiful *Book of Joy*, with all the sufferings of Tibet and South Africa and so forth. How can they still laugh? Because they live in the reality of the present. They live in the heart of love. They live in the spaciousness of loving awareness. They become gracious.

And when you do, you become fearless. It doesn't mean fear doesn't arise, but something bigger happens. You sit in meditation and you face your tears and your worries and your anxiety and your trauma and your grief and all of that. And you face your longing and your love and all the beautiful things. And you take your one seat in the middle of it all and become the loving witness.

I work with a group of CEOs of some of the top twenty companies in the country, or the world. I don't know quite how it happened, but I've ended up with this as one of my assignments. And I like it because they're smart, mostly, and the ones who choose to come to me are ones with good values.

One CEO came to see me, and she was being attacked—it's hard for women as leaders, even more than men in our patriarchal culture—she was being attacked for her liberal policies and support and vision. We talked about how you could find this spacious equanimity in the midst of it all. Sweep through your body and return the sufferings to the earth so you don't carry them. I said, "You need backup, but you shouldn't carry it in your body."

She said, "What kind of backup do you mean?"

I said, "Here, I'm going to come back in a few days." And I brought her this beautiful statue of Durga, one of the Indian goddesses with eight arms filled with all these weapons. I said, "It's said that when you have trouble, you call on Durga. She'll come and take care of the demons, and then you're fine."

But along with Durga, I gave her a series of pictures: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King. And because she was also working in the tech world, Nikola Tesla and Einstein and Louis Pasteur. We made a kind of altar. And I said, "Now, when you sit, you turn to them and say, 'Okay, I know you've done it. You've all been attacked. There's Galileo—they wanted to throw him on the pyre. We can do this.' They're cheering for you."

And it changed everything.

The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. So what you bring to the game then is emptiness and love. You bring your presence.

When I was a monk, and before that living in Thailand, there had been some very violent student demonstrations in Bangkok. The military dictatorship was resisting, and the students were doing what students do and are supposed to do—they were protesting. It got quite violent for a long time. There was a standoff at the barricades, you know the whole archetype. And the country was in great dismay because things weren't moving, and the violence was escalating.

One morning, the abbot of a forest monastery gathered together a whole group of his monks and nuns. They got onto a big bus and drove into Bangkok. Out came sixty monks and nuns with their ochre forest robes, and they made a line. They stood between the military and the students in the street all day. They didn't move. And when someone asked why they were there, they said, "We're here to practice loving-kindness and peace."

And they stood there peacefully and lovingly for an entire day. And when they left, the space that was created was enough for the student leaders and the military leaders to begin a conversation to unwind that conflict.

You become gracious and fearless in a different way, and more flexible. It doesn't mean that you don't care, but you're not attached in the same way.

A poem from Hala Alyan, who is a great Palestinian poet: "I'm here to tell you that the tide will never stop coming in. I'm here to tell you whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful." That's a line—whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful.

And you become gracious and flexible. My friend who started Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, Father Greg Boyle—his work is mostly to love these people that have not been loved, the gang members who've lost so many friends to gun violence and prisons. He doesn't judge them. They say, "Father G, I need some money, I need bail, I need help." And he just gives it to them and loves them and supports them in ways they would never have felt before. He doesn't judge them. That's the moral arc.

So what can you do? You plant seeds. As Henry David Thoreau reminds us, "I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, but I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

And those wonders come in part from your trust in the long-term moral arc. They come from the seeds of your best intention. You don't know when those seeds will sprout, but if you act from the place of beauty and trust and love—I think it was Immanuel Kant who talked about how there were moral acts of ethics and then there were moral acts of beauty. And those are the ones with the greatest power.

The Bhagavad Gita explains it as the secret. Here it is: the secret is to act beautifully without attachment to the fruits of the actions, because that's not given to you. You get to see the dance of life from the place of loving awareness and plant amazing seeds and let it unfold. Don't be so damn attached to it all, because that's not your job. Your job is to care and not to care. Plant seeds, vote your heart and your conscience, act without attachment to the fruits of the actions—because you don't know, it's the Chinese horse, who's supposed to be the leaders, what's supposed to happen.

From the Tao, it says, "When you don't realize the truth, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, who you are, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king, immersed in the wonder of the Tao. You can deal with whatever life brings you. You can serve whatever life asks of you. And even when death comes, you can smile."

If you want to read anything remarkable, read Father Greg Boyle's first book, *Tattoos on the Heart*.

So let's take a minute to be quiet, and then we'll do a little dialogue together.

A student speaks: "The questions you're raising—I don't think we can sustain ourselves through all the insanity unless we follow some of the paths that you outlined. I have so many friends, and we're all getting older. People are starting to have worse physical pain or sickness, but they don't slow down. They just keep going as hard as they can. And I don't know what to say. I think the root of that is inside what you're saying—we do what we can. That's all there is."

"And this is what you're saying — we'll plant seeds. Maybe the grass, maybe it's about results, but I don't know if you have any advice about how to talk about that. I mean, I've had to deal with that for a long time, and I'm really working on it, but I don't know what to say to my friends. I mean, they're great people, they do great work, but they can't sustain it at that rate."

"Well, what I feel, China, because you spent your decades as an activist yourself — you've just really given yourself — I feel how much you care. And also, I feel that in these years, you've learned something like Gandhi taking a day a week in silence.

You've learned somehow that you have to sustain yourself, and some of your friends haven't yet. So if the wisest woman you can imagine were to give you some advice, what would she say to you, China?"

"The thing I can think of is... I have a friend who used to say, when people couldn't spend time with their family because they were at work, she would say, 'You're not going to regret that you didn't work more when you die.' And it's like, I feel like we have to — I mean, I guess what she would say is, a lot of it is about who you are and not what you accomplish. And you just have to accept that."

"What I hear, and I really appreciate what you said, is that somehow you've now been cast in the role of the wise woman for your friends. And some of them are lost in a way. But the fact that you're talking with them and that you carry this voice is already a gift. Just like all your work to build a more moral and gracious community and society, you now have a new role. You have become that, you know, and it's a beautiful thing to see. So I thank you."

"Thanks so much, Jack. I appreciate that."

"Thank you. That's helpful."

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"Jeff, would you come on and speak to Jack?"

"Jeff, how great."

"Hey, really good to see you."

"Glad to see you. Wonderful talk. So thanks for mentioning water. Got me going a little bit about fish appearing from water. I happen to live next to a creek — Alhambra Creek in Martinez. And it's a year-round source of water. I use it to water my yard. And the redwood trees love it, and everything loves a little water. The yard's doing fine — you can just see it over my shoulder a little bit.

That creek also, in these rainy years, has flooded and done severe damage to myself and my neighbors. And so should I curse the creek? You know? No. It doesn't work that way for me.

I first met you in a flood of emotions. The perfect woman had left me. She was looking for the perfect man, probably. Apparently she left her glasses at home because I was right there. That began the time that I've been listening and participating with you. I no longer — to the Chinese horse story — I am no longer made difficult. There's no diffi-

culty that arises when the flood comes, because every year it rains, every year the flood comes. Maybe it's bad this time, maybe it's not so bad this time, but there's always water in the creek. So I just keep a calm attitude, and your advice to care and not care — I'm not sure exactly what that means, but it resonates with me, as practically everything I've ever heard you say has. So thank you very much for being my teacher."

"Jeff, you're a poet as well as many other things — a teamster poet and many other things. One of the things that you speak of, and I hear from you, is your relationship to the — you have a relationship. You and the creek are in relationship, and she floods and you befriended her in some way. And that's what I've learned about you — that you have a lot of water of tears, that your poetry and your"

work now is also to see with kindly eyes this world and to care with an open heart. So you and the creek are somehow relatives, and you're living together. You befriended each other. You know that she rises sometimes, so you can prepare a little bit. Anybody in a relationship knows this happens. So I want to celebrate the water of your tears and the water of your creek, and kind of reflect back the relationship that you have. Thank you for your words.

There's a comment in the chat from Carl. He writes, "I must have spoken to you before your talk and told you exactly what I needed to hear. Thank you for somehow knowing."

Oh, thank you, Carl. I appreciate that comment. Somehow we do get tuned with each other, and it's beautiful.

You know, folks, part of what happens when we come together in a field of care and openness—you know, emptiness and form, both the spaciousness of the heart that's big enough to hold it all and the care that comes out of it—then when we act, we become, even in difficult times or maybe especially, we can become what is sometimes called a "make-weight."

If you don't know that term, because it's not very common: when you have balance scales, and you go to some markets and places where there'll be that balance scale, on one side they put the papayas or the tomatoes or whatever, and on the other side they put these weights. The last in that line of weights are these very little weights, and they're the ones at the end that you put—one little make-weight at the end—and finally the scale tips.

In some way, I believe that we become the make-weights in this world, even when things are difficult, by our presence, our care, our connection to what matters, and also that spaciousness. We can place that weight, and the scales tip toward justice, toward beauty, toward love.

Maybe this is enough words for tonight. You all are quiet, and I'm deeply appreciative of that. We're quiet together. And we're holding this world and this mystery of life in loving awareness and a big heart shared.

So thank you. As always, it's a pleasure.

CHAPTER 49

A Labor of Love

Jack Kornfield · 1h36

> *In this heartfelt Monday night talk, Jack Kornfield offers a fresh perspective on Labor Day by shifting from traditional teachings on right livelihood to exploring what it means to make our lives a "labor of love." Drawing from his decades of teaching and personal experiences in India and Bali, he contrasts Western identity through work with Eastern traditions that define people by their spiritual devotion.*
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> *The talk begins with a guided meditation that approaches the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) through a lens of gratitude—thanking the body, heart, and mind for all they carry, rather than trying to fix or perfect our experience. Kornfield emphasizes that "the goal of anything is to perfect your love" rather than perfecting ourselves or our mindfulness practice.*
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> *Kornfield shares practical wisdom for keeping the heart open during difficult times: cultivating trust in the vastness of time, maintaining a daily meditation practice, engaging in mettā (loving-kindness) throughout daily activities, seeing others as young children, and celebrating life's gifts. He addresses a mother's profound grief and fear for her teenage son, guiding her through a practice of bringing loving awareness to difficult emotions and ultimately toward the wisdom of setting loved ones free. The talk reminds us that we are held by something greater than our struggles, and that blessing ourselves and others is the essential work of being human.*

I'm glad to see you all here tonight. It's an odd relationship, you in your little squares and me in mine on the other side. But it's what we have, and it's a pleasure. I do miss meeting in person, I have to say. There's something so special about it. But I'm also glad we can gather virtually because it means people who don't live locally can be part of Monday night, and I appreciate that as well.

For those of you listening who are new—some of you have signed up as Spirit Rock Stewardship Circle members, while others are joining through YouTube or Facebook or whatever other channels exist. I don't even keep track of them all, but I know you're out there, and I welcome you.

Monday night has been for me a teaching time and a kind of personal ritual. I started teaching Monday nights forty years ago when I moved full time to Marin County from the East Coast, where we—Joseph and Sharon and other friends—started our center in Barre, Massachusetts. I did it pretty much every week for thirty or thirty-five years. Now I teach once a month, but I still feel deeply connected to the community.

Part of what Monday night is, is a reminder to all of us when we come together of what matters—in whatever way you can hear that in your own heart and in your own being. We take time to pause, to reflect, to listen to some Dharma teachings, to connect with one another. I really enjoy it, and tonight I look forward to the dialogues and questions and responses that we'll share.

For those listening in the broader audience, if you've never been on a retreat, coming to Spirit Rock is really magic. It's an amazing, beautiful valley that we acquired forty years ago from the Nature Conservancy to protect. We've preserved almost all of the 412 acres except for the bottom part of the valley where our retreat buildings stand. The rest is wonderful land to walk on, with beautiful tree groves and expansive views.

More than that, we so need time to go on retreat. There's something about a retreat that's different from just relaxing or taking quiet time at home. The discipline and the invitation and the community support really become magic. We used to joke about it after so many years of retreats—we called one feature of it "the Vipassana facelift." People would come on retreat after being really busy beforehand, struggling to get everything together, wondering if they even really wanted to go. They'd finally arrive, and you could see all the struggle in their bodies, the tension they'd carried for weeks and months, everything that had been going on. It's just obvious because we live in a culture and time that's so demanding.

And at the end of a week or ten days or longer, they'd be ready to leave—forget the Botox. Their faces were all smooth and clear. Their eyes were shining. We could sell this in Hollywood, I know we could. There's something that's good for your spirit and your smile and your heart and your body and your mind. So here I am touting retreat, because it changes your life.

What we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We start with a meditation, which we'll do for about twenty-five to thirty minutes. Some of it is guided. Then we take a break for five minutes to stretch or relax. That's usually followed, as tonight, by some teachings, and then a period of dialogue, questions and responses. Whatever brings you here, you are welcome. As Emiko said, all the parts of you are welcome. This is a heart space that says, "Yes, you belong here." I feel your attention and your presence, and we share it.

So let's begin with some meditation practice. Let yourself find a way to sit that is stable and comfortable and also alert, in whatever way works for you, so there's a sense of presence and ease. Take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human incarnation. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently, or if that doesn't work, lower your gaze and bring your attention kindly just here where you are. We tend to focus so much on what we're doing and where we're going, on external things. Let that settle and come into the present moment, the reality of the present.

And to bring body, heart, mind all together. Bring your attention here to this embodied experience. Feel the presence of your life here, seated on earth. And take two or three long breaths to help everything settle.

Invite the presence of mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, to notice just this moment, just as it is. As you feel your body seated here, let the sense of ease and relaxation deepen. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your whole body on the chair, the cushion, wherever you're seated. The weight of gravity pulling your body back to Mother Earth. And relax with it. Trust that the Earth supports you as you meet her. You take a relaxed and steady seat just here. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now with this embodied presence, pay attention to the life of this body you've been given. With loving awareness, feel how it breathes itself, wherever you sense it. The earth is breathing you. The atmosphere of air shared with the trees and all the living creatures. Feel how the earth breathes you, breath by breath. There's no right breath. Sometimes it's short or long or shallow or deep. Let it breathe itself. And you rest in a mindful, loving awareness that feels how the body breathes, inviting an ease with each breath.

Allow the mindful loving awareness of the body breathing to notice as well all that's carried in your body, very kindly. The areas of tension or contraction or stress. Notice the places of openness and ease. Notice the whole field of the body. It's alive with vibrations and tingling, warmth and cool, places of pleasure and of pain. The whole field of the body—you hold this mysterious, blessed field of energy with loving awareness. This body, with its delights and its illnesses, its struggles, its play. You feel how it's always changing, tingling, vibrating, breathing, the life of the body.

And now, as if you could offer a bow, say to your body, thank you. Thank you for carrying so much, for carrying the beauty and the tears, the joys and the pain. So much you carry. Thank you. Holding it with loving awareness. Thank you. I'm okay just now. You can relax. Here in this present moment, I'm okay with it all. You can relax and rest with a spacious ease and gratitude, holding this whole bodily experience with kindness.

And with the same spirit of loving awareness, mindfulness, bring your attention to your heart, to the heart that holds so much. Yes, the physical heart, but the bigger heart that carries your longings and love, your tenderness and your pain, that holds hopes and worry. The heart has so many things it holds. Frustration and joy. Kindness. Impatience. All of it. Deep fears and even deeper love.

With mindful loving awareness, sense all that your heart has been carrying, surrounding it with kindness and compassion. All the tears and beauty and pain and love, all carried by this wondrous heart, this human heart.

And as you hold the fullness of this human heart with loving awareness, as if to offer a bow, you can say thank you. Thank you for carrying so much. Thank you for carrying the joys and the sorrows. Thank you. You can relax just now. I'm okay here in the present moment.

Let yourself rest in the reality of the present. Thank you, you can relax and be at ease. I'm okay, it's okay. We can hold it all.

Let the breath deepen. And experience the great heart of a Buddha in yourself—the great heart that holds it all with kindness and wisdom. We can do this.

And with the same mindful, loving attention, become aware of the mind, the thinking mind, the busy, ever-present stream of thoughts and images. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. They pour out. It thinks and spins and remembers and envisions. It rehearses and plans. It analyzes.

Feel the whole busyness of the mind, figuring things out, trying to take care of you, trying to keep you safe. Sometimes it feels energetically a little like the hamster in the wheel, going round and round, all to try to make it okay, to help you figure things out.

Hold it all. Surround it with kindness, compassion—it works so hard. Feel its energy. And notice when you bring kindness to all the energy of the mind, whether it likes it.

With loving awareness, as if to make a bow to the mind and all it does, you can say thank you. Thank you for working so hard to keep me safe, to take care of me in this life. I'm okay just now. You can relax. I'm okay just here and now. You can rest.

Let the mind settle down, held in the space of mindful loving kindness. You can relax and be at ease just here and now, in this moment.

And notice the space of stillness in the awareness beyond the thinking mind, beyond the words and images—the vast, silent, loving awareness that is who you are.

Shift your attention. You have noticed the experiences of the body. But who was noticing them? You have noticed the pain and the pleasure, the measure of joy and suffering carried in the heart. But who was noticing it? You notice the busyness of the mind, thoughts and images.

And relax back. Become the field of loving awareness itself, like space or sky. You are the awareness. You are consciousness itself, experiencing the body, the emotions, and thoughts. You are the loving witness, the timeless consciousness. Rest in it. Trust it. It is your home.

I invite you to take your seat and be comfortable and listen again, as usual, not to take notes. There's no quiz at the end. And in fact, not even to believe anything I say—even I don't believe everything I say, so why would you? Rather, listen and sense if there's something that resonates, something that's true for you, a reminder. If so, wonderful, and if not, just let it go. Listening in that way is its own kind of meditation, its own form of mindful presence, allowing. And then it has a bit of care or discernment in it.

For tonight, given that it's Labor Day, I had a long, well-crafted talk prepared, which I sometimes like to do. Those talks go on for an hour with all kinds of quotes and texts and so forth on right livelihood. I was on my way to the drug store to pick up a statin that my cardiologist said I should start to take because it will be good for me as I enter my eighties. Okay, you should probably take it. All right.

I was thinking about it, and I realized I didn't really like the talk. It felt too teacherly and too formal in some way. So I decided to simplify it a lot and try it a different way, which I will. Rather than talk about right livelihood and what the Buddha taught, I'd like to talk about the labor of love.

We spend so much of our time—in many cases more than half our life—working. This is Labor Day. And in the West, we define ourselves often by our work. You meet somebody and one of the first questions is, "What do you do?" "Well, I'm a financial analyst," or "I'm a nurse," or "I'm a gardener," or whatever it happens to be—a teacher.

In India, that's not what people ask. Instead of asking what you do, which helps them understand who you are, they ask, "Who do you worship? Who is your God?" Are you a follower of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles? Are you a Shaivite, where Shiva is the deity? Are you a follower of Ram, Ram and Sita, the path of love? And they know you by being a Vaishnavite who follows Vishnu, or someone who follows whatever the particular goddess or deity lights you up and inspires your life.

What a different way to see people. Who's your spiritual star? Who inspires you, instead of what kind of work do you do?

The beautiful thing is when you go into taxis. I think of those years I spent time in India, in Bombay with Nisargadatta, this wonderful guru I was with. Sometimes I rode the double-decker buses, which was great, but I'd take a taxi, and the taxis have a little shrine on the dashboard. Yes, there's the speedometer, which no one pays attention to. And there's the signals, which maybe or maybe not. But on top of that, there's Ganesh, or there's Sita and Ram, or there's Hanuman. And that's what matters more than anything.

I've told this story before, and I will tell some others—old stories that I love. When I lived in Bali over a number of different years for periods of time, my daughter, during one of those long stays of many months, was six years old. We were living with a Balinese family, and we found a school for dance. All the kids in Bali do dance, and her Balinese friends were training.

So she went to this school on Jalan Sugriva. Bali is so interesting because it's kind of a South Sea Island culture mixed with Hinduism, so you have all the gods and goddesses. And she started to learn Balinese dance. Of course, as a six-year-old, that was a class—it was fun.

By the time we were getting ready to leave months later, they were going to hold a kind of performance, her last performance, showing what she'd learned. So we went, and it was in the afternoon, and they started to get her ready for her dance performance. They wrapped her in silk and put all kinds of makeup on her, which she loved, then did her hair up and put these gold flowers in it. The teacher's wife took off some of her gold bracelets and put them on—for little girls who liked that kind of thing, it was like her best dream.

Meanwhile, it was starting to get dark. It was late afternoon and I had my video camera and I'm dad—I'm gonna film my daughter's Balinese dance. And I started to get impatient. After more than an hour of them dressing her to the nines, the teacher could see I was getting impatient. He looked at me kindly and said, "Relax. You'll get whatever

film you get. But in Bali, we believe that everyone is an artist, whether they're five or six or eighty-five or eighty-six, and they don't perform for the audience. They perform for the gods. They make their dance an offering. And so your daughter is an artist, and we want her to look her very best in her offering to the gods."

If you travel in Bali—and it's a culture that I love—it's the most robust culture in spite of all the tourists. Everybody is an artist. The guy in the bank is also a gamelan music player, and the nurse or the doctor in the clinic is also a painter or part of a Balinese dance troupe, and the auto mechanic sings. Everybody is an artist. In fact, they don't think of art as something separate from life. You do it for the gods—or you meet someone and ask, "Who are you really?" "Well, I'm a follower of Hanuman, the servant of Ram who offers gratitude and support to everything good in this world." What a way to define yourself or to steer yourself in this life.

You know that story of the cathedral in France? A man was traveling through a town and went by an unfinished building in the stone yard. There were some people chipping away at stones and he began to talk to them. He said, "So what are you doing here?" One man said, "I'm a stonemason. I carve stones." The man smiled and nodded and wandered around a little more. He saw another man and asked again, "So what are you doing here?" This one said, "Well, I carve stone, but I do it because it's a beautiful livelihood. I like doing it. And I get money to support my family and to live a good life in this town. It's a good livelihood." The man thought, "That's beautiful."

He wandered around more. Finally, he saw a third person chipping away at the stone. He said, "I see you're one of the stonemasons here." The guy's face lit up with a smile. "Yes," he said. "I am building a great cathedral. It may not be done in my grandchildren's lifetime. But what I'm doing with each strike of the hammer is to build a magnificent cathedral."

So how do we do the things that we do in this world? Yes, we need to feed our family or make money or get through the day. But what does it mean to live this life with a joyful spirit and warm heart? Think of the people you run into, whatever they're doing—whether they're the cashier in a market or the person you deal with for finances or the auto mechanic or the nurse. The ones who do it with a joyful spirit—what that's like.

Again, my daughter. She used to love going over the Golden Gate Bridge, first of all because once in a while we would get one of the toll takers who would smile and say, "Welcome to the city of St. Francis." That made us all light up. What a cool thing. But her favorite thing was to pay for the car behind us, back when you still paid before it all got automated. She'd say, "Daddy, let's pay for the car behind us." So, okay, we'd pay for the car behind us.

And then she said, OK, go slow and turn around and look. And the people would get up there and learn that their toll was paid by the car ahead. And then she would look back and smile and they would all laugh.

What a way to go through the world. Why not? What would it mean to keep your heart open as you go through the day? And what helps you? Because you're supported by the universe. The universe obviously approves of you because you're here, right? You are approved of. What helps you to keep that joyful spirit, playful, warmhearted? What reminds you, inspires you? Who reminds you?

When we did the guided meditation at the beginning of this Monday night class, perhaps you noticed that the instructions have changed somewhat. We went through the foundations of mindfulness—of body and feelings and mind and dharma—but in a different way from how I used to teach it. I would teach, okay, be mindful of the breath. Here's the practice of mindfulness of breathing with ease, breathing in and out and concentrating and focusing, all of which has great value, especially if you do it over some period of time and the mind becomes focused and steady.

But instead, I found how helpful it is for people to begin to be aware of their embodied experience, their emotional experience, the activities of their mind and say, thank you. It changes the valence. Instead of being kind of the mindful observer, there's this generosity that says, thank you for carrying this, for breathing, for holding the emotions, for carrying the struggles in the body and the beautiful things. Thank you for trying to protect me, mind. And you can feel how it surrounds all of that with gratitude and loving kindness.

So you're able to be aware, but you're not trying to fix it or get different because the goal isn't to perfect yourself or perfect your mindfulness or perfect the world. The goal of anything is to perfect your love, our love. And so it's a little different valence, a different way of paying attention.

So what about when things are hard? How does the heart hold them? And I could go down the list—the political divisiveness and the politics and the elections. And politics, by the way, in case you've forgotten, is ritualized warfare. The Republicans and Democrats don't send their knights on horses with lances and they don't send their armies to D.C., except for maybe armies of lobbyists and online whatever. But it's really a kind of ritualized power struggle to see who's going to carry the responsibility and the role forward. But there's so much divisiveness in it.

And then we have the continuing wars—Sudan and Gaza and Venezuela and Ukraine, trench warfare in Europe. We thought that was over. Oh, my God. And climate change and racism and all of the struggles of humanity. And the economic divide—very rich on one side and large numbers of people who struggle financially on the other. It's why Labor Day became so important. It celebrated the life of working people and celebrated the right to unionize or to have an eight-hour work day or to not have child labor, those kinds of things. But it's hard in a modern capitalist industrial society. There's this huge economic divide.

So here we are—climate change and wars and economic struggle and so forth. How do you tend your heart in all this? How do you hold your heart? How do you keep a spiritual perspective, which is not a grim duty? Okay, I'm supposed to meditate, like I go to the gym and I work out and I have a good diet and I, you know, whatever, now I meditate. It's meant to be something more uplifting, like that thank you—that gratitude, that spirit of loving awareness that says, wow, here we are. How do I navigate this? How do I tend my heart?

What helps me is a sense of trust in the vastness of time. I don't see spiritual practice as a grim duty. I see it as an invitation to open and hold it all with the great heart of a Buddha. And I hear Dr. King saying the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And I believe it. I believe there's a fundamental goodness, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it, in the human heart.

And I sense it and know it and trust it.

It's easy to get scared because the way politics works is that it tries to scare you. That's the currency of politics. Let's scare people, make you anxious, and then you'll vote for us. Those people are going to do something terrible. You better vote for us. It's all going to hell and we will rescue you. That's the game.

Having a vast sense of trust, it plays out. Praise and blame, gain and loss, birth and death, joy and sorrow, Republicans and Democrats and everybody in between. This is the game of being human. You can hold it all with a sense of perspective. I can. And practice helps.

Having a meditation where you daily quiet yourself—where I quiet myself, quiet the mind and tend the heart—and have the perspective, as it says in the Bhagavad Gita, the secret. You remember the secret, right? The secret is to act beautifully, to act well, without attachment to the fruits of the actions. It's not given to you to determine, cer-

tainly in the short term, how it turns out. But it's given to me and you to plant beautiful seeds and water them. And that you can do in this life. If you have a seed, eventually it will bear fruit.

Practicing mindfulness, quieting the mind, tending the heart. What helps me is doing mettā. This year, I'm just doing mettā practice. I'm doing loving-kindness practice. And I love doing it. I love doing it when I drive because I can feel a little irritation come up when somebody cuts me off or somebody's impolite. I've been an aggressive driver—I was trained as a taxi driver in Boston. I know how to get my way through traffic. I've become kinder somewhat, but mostly I bless people when they piss me off. I go, "Oh, having a hard day. May you be safe and protected."

When I go through the grocery store, I look at the tired people working there or the people shopping late or early. Bless you. May you be safe and well, surrounded by love. I bless the trees and they bless me back. And it changes me to do mettā—to sit and do loving-kindness meditation, to share it.

I remember the teachers that inspired me. Ram Dass, who became more or less just love at the end of his life. He loved everything. One of my friends was there with him in his wheelchair after twenty years of living with his stroke and disability. He'd had a lot of illnesses and almost died. He was in a lot of pain often. This person walking with him said, "Ram Dass, are you in pain?" And he looked up and said, "I love my pain. I love everything. I love my pain." It was an amazing moment.

To bring it back: to love this life that we have, with all of it. That helps me to stay true in some way. Because everybody wants you to be something or do something—or if not, you internalize it from the society.

Remember the story of the little boy who went to the restaurant with his mom? The waitress came up to the table and said, "What would you like?" And he said, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." His mom looked at the waitress and said, "He'll have meatloaf and mashed potatoes, please." The waitress took all the other orders, wrote them down. And as she was about to leave the table, she looked at the little boy and said, "Do you want ketchup and mustard with your hot dog?" A big smile broke out on his face. And as she left, he turned to his mom and said, "She thinks I'm real."

How do we stay real to ourselves? And to each other. That's something too. Am I being true to myself, what everybody else expects aside? I ask myself this because there are all these requests and opportunities and problems and things to do. And I take some time to listen. What's my task? What's my love, really? What's your love?

I also get help from gratitude, keeping the heart open with all this. Sylvia Boorstein, another of our colleagues, another teacher—she and a friend became gratitude buddies. At the end of every day, they text each other two things they're grateful for, which means you have to scan your day and say, what am I going to text tonight that I'm grateful for? It's so helpful to have that spirit of gratitude, for myself and for others. If you want to learn more about it, go to Brother David Steindl-Rast's site—I think it's gratitude.org or something like that. He's really a wonderful teacher. Gratitude.

And then celebrate. Trudy and I went out on a date a couple of nights ago. We just took our time. We took a stroll along the water as the sun was setting, and then we went to our favorite French restaurant. I thought, God, it's so great—time in nature, walking along the bay, the waves, watching the moon, having a date. Please celebrate.

You remember that story of the priest? He was not quite accosted, but one of the young monks in the monastery was given the task of copying the prayer texts and the rules for the order because the old copies were wearing out. He was copying them dutifully, and then he got kind of upset one night. He had a dream. He said, what if someone made a mistake? We've been copying the copies and copying those copies for centuries. Is this really the great texts that our ancestors gave to us? So he went to the master there and said, I'm worried about these—we keep copying them, but they may not be really accurate. Could you go look? Because down in the bottom of the great monastery were the special rooms where the original texts were kept, wrapped up, sacred texts. Let's just check.

So the abbot went down, and he didn't come back up for a while. The young acolyte thought, what's the matter? He waited longer, and finally he went down the stairs toward the crypts where the great texts were kept, usually locked up, and he heard the abbot crying. He said, Master, why are you crying? And the abbot said, I read it. It said celebrate, not celibate.

Celebrate is what makes me happy too. And you—why not celebrate? I watch the Dalai Lama and Tutu and all these icons of joy, and I think of sharing mudita, which is one of the great Brahma Viharas, shared joy, paired joy. It's not an individual practice like metta is for oneself and others. Mudita is the joy in the happiness of others. It's one of my favorites.

You know that story of the farmer who had some of the most prized and best corn in all of Iowa? He'd go to the county fair and there would be all these exhibits, and they would be judging who had the best corn—the big kernels—and he had the most magnificent corn. But he also had the practice every year of giving away his best seed corn to all the farmers who lived around him. Somebody said to him, why would you do that?

You know, with the old American competitive spirit—you've got the best corn. And he looked at them so kindly and said, because the wind blows. If my neighbors grow inferior corn in their fields, it will blow over and pollinate my fields too. The fact that I can share the best means we all get to share in the blessings of this really fine corn.

And I know it—when I'm able to share something that I love, music, care for something. It won't be the corn because I'm not a farmer or a gardener. Maybe I farm other kinds of things. I farm loving-kindness in the heart—and on a good day, mind you.

Not always. But this is what it's like—it's our nature to want to share. Every little kid says, "Take a bite of this. Try this." You know how they want to stick stuff in your mouth when they're little? Because they're loving it.

There is a practice with mudita of picturing others and seeing them as a young child. I do this when I do my metta practice. If I go along and somebody seems grumpy or difficult, I gaze at them and look—what were they like when they were five years old? Still with a lot of innocence, getting ready to go to school, young and earnest. And I can see what that child was like. All of a sudden my heart just melts and I think, "Yeah, you too. Here we are. I know who's in there, even though you're being brusque or mean or whatever." Under there is that kid. Because it's still in all of us, that child of the spirit.

And then you envision what their happiest moments were. Even people with terrible childhoods had a happy moment where they rolled down a grassy hill or played in the sand or something like that.

My five-year-old grandson started kindergarten this past week. It's a big deal to go to school. You're a big kid now. Here's your little backpack, and you are becoming a school kid. I think he was some combination of anxious and scared—it's new. Would he have any friends there? It was a new school. Kind of, okay, stiff upper lip, I can do it. But you could see the tears.

I remember a couple of years before, when he was in preschool. He'd started a new preschool and had a hard time for a bit. Then I was visiting him, and he said to me, "Baba"—which is what he calls me. He said with this big smile, "I have two friends." And he gave me their names. "I have two friends." It was just so tender. *I have two friends.* We want that. We want that.

And this is what loving kindness and joy and mudita is. We talk about what keeps the heart open in these difficult and divisive times. It's our friendships, our love for one another, the vastness of space and time, the moral arc long but bending toward justice, gratitude, care for one another. What better can you do?

Happy Labor Day. This is the real labor. It is. It's the labor of love.

Arisaka, I'm so happy to see you here.

"So much wisdom tonight, Jack. So much wisdom of the elder. Thank you."

We're elders together, kiddo. It's come to this.

"I was especially touched by the notion of seeing the child in the other. For me, one of the things I did—I woke up one night very afraid, and I did Tsultrim Allione's Feeding Your Demons practice. One of the gifts you can receive from this persona, this archetype that you fear, came to me. The gift was about seeing the small, scared child even in the face of the person you fear. There's a political person I'm thinking about—I'm not going to say their name—but that understanding that even in that person there's a small scared child who wanted to get their father's love and approval. It shifted something in me, because it made me realize every one of us came out—I was a midwife for twenty years—every one of us came out of the womb as a child just needing love. And all the horrendous things that some people evolve to do stem from how they were treated. To really see people not as enemies but to truly see that child and try to connect is so profound. I'm really glad you spoke to it. Because one of the decisions I've made as an elder is that as I prepare to leave, I don't want to leave angry at anybody. I want to leave with compassion for everybody. And seeing that child, knowing that child exists—it's so important. So thank you for that."

Oh, Arisaka, I just want to pause and drink in and honor and celebrate. You really, in these few words, offered us your heart—what really matters to your heart. When I hear it, there's such a sweetness. So thank you for dessert. It's the end of the evening, and if you're going to leave, leave with a really good dessert. Thank you, dear.

And Priscilla, I see a hand.

"Can you hear me?"

Yes, I can hear you just fine.

"Jack, you don't know me, but I feel like I know you. I've listened to you for years, and I feel very grateful for that. I also feel grateful because it was a beautiful evening—I could go to a gong bath and listen to the beauty of gongs and bathe in that, and then come and listen to your talk and bathe in this. Something I want to say is that the sound of your voice, and all our voices, sometimes gets lost because we're so much trying to figure out and listen to the content. When I listened to the gongs and listened to you, it was all so beautiful when it comes from the heart. All the voices that come from the

heart are so soothing and comforting. Yes, what you say is so important, but just the sound of our voices when they come from the heart makes me teary. I just wanted to thank you over the years for your voice. It's a song to me at this point. And when I listen closely to so many people who show up authentically from the heart, it's all a song."

Priscilla, thank you. This is sweet. We get to share this, and it makes me happy too. I have a question for you. What helps you hear that song that you said is comforting and soothing, that sense of harmony, even when you're out in traffic and the horns are honking and the red light is flashing? As we go through our life, what helps you stay tuned to the harmony?

"Well, I'll tell you—I think because I've had a regular meditation practice for years—"

If I can drop into my heart, that's all I have to do. If I can get present, I just inhale and exhale, and it works. I just came off a week-long workshop on awe and happiness, and it touched on all the points you've been talking about. Because I'm also a writer, and when I listen to the bells, how I describe it when you really hear and get present—it's like chocolate cake in the womb. When you were talking about dessert with that lovely woman, that's exactly what it is. When we come from the heart, we find that baby Buddha within all of us. You just have to remember. And sometimes in traffic, you forget.

Chocolate cake in the womb. I will remember that too. Thank you, dear. This is wonderful.

Another voice spoke: So nice to see you, Jack. Actually, the woman before me said a lot of what I was thinking about. Over the years, your voice has been so musical to me, so soothing. I wrote down a couple things so I wouldn't forget—I forget everything after two minutes.

When you were talking about how people introduce themselves and ask what you do—I've been a writer and an artist all my life. Sometimes I would say, "I'm a writer," and sometimes, "I'm an artist," and people would respond, "Wow, that's so cool." It made me realize how lucky I was to be an artist and a writer. It taught me so much gratitude through their responses. I learned from all these people.

Gratitude is something I've studied a lot, in a twelve-step program and other places. Gratitude is just so important. And so I want to thank you, to give you so much gratitude, because you have helped me over the years. And you continue to.

I'm listening and taking it in with much appreciation for your gratitude. But I also love that people say, "You're so lucky you're an artist." Somehow I dream that our culture would say, "Your life is your art. You are an artist." It's like Bali—you are an artist, you just don't know it. We are all a fountain of creativity, and it wants to come through us. When people light up seeing it in you, you're reminding them of something. It's a gift to them, but it also reminds them: I have that too.

Exactly. Sometimes I would say to them, "You're an artist too, you just don't do it." They think that's kind of crazy, but I believe that. I believe that very deeply.

So it's easy for me to say, "Yes, you're an artist too. Go and draw something."

There was a little girl who was being driven to preschool by her mom. Her mom was an art professor at a university. As they're driving there, before she drops her off, the little girl asks, "So, Mommy, what do you do as an art professor?" Her mother said, "I teach people how to draw." And the little girl looked at her and said, "You mean they forget?"

Yes. Yes, exactly.

I had a similar experience when my son was pretty little. He was maybe five or six. I used to teach writing, so very often he would ask, "Where are you going?" And I'd say, "I'm going to teach writing." One day he just looked up at me and said, "Are these grownups?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Don't they know how to write?" He thought I was teaching them cursive or something like that. How perfect is that? "Don't they know how to write?"

The next person to speak was Pamela. "Hi, Jack. I have a question. I had talked to you once before. I'm so honored and appreciative of your time. I'm a mom of twin boys and I've been divorced for many years. I guess my question is, how do you love this life when you are dealing with incredible grief?"

She continued, "I've been locked into this terrible struggle with the father of my sons for almost seventeen years. And now one of my twins has told me he doesn't want to live with me anymore—he only wants to live with his dad. I have been so full of grief and worry. How do I try to trust? How do I not hate and feel anger towards his father? I've spent so many years being a mother. I feel like I'm losing that ability and I feel terrified that I won't get my son back. I've spent the last two years fighting for his health. I don't know exactly what the question is. Is it how does one try to feel gratitude and joy? Or how do I trust that he'll come back to me?"

I listened to her, and first I wanted to bow to the honesty of what she was saying and the depth of the pain she was expressing as a mother—because that's some of the deepest pain we have as parents, taking care of our children, trusting them, hoping, not wanting anything to happen. It's built into a mother's DNA. And of course that brings fear and worry, and also a lot of attachment. You may have noticed.

I asked, "He's seventeen, you said? How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

And he has a lot of medical issues that I've been managing. He doesn't want to deal with them or have me manage them anymore.

You know what? You have done beautifully. I hear it. You've tended him. You've cared for him. You've handled the medical needs. You've protected him from things, maybe from his father. Magnificent. It's exactly what a mother is supposed to do.

And now it's like the fledglings in the nest—he has to try to fly. When I hear you, I sense that he may even unconsciously realize that the only way he can learn to fly is to separate from you, because you've done everything for him. Something in him... it's like young men at some point who say, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?" They want to. He wants to do something to make his life that's not entwined with his mother.

You needed to protect him and be that close to him to protect him. And now he's saying, "Okay, you've done it, Mom. Now I've got to try it." And then there's that part of you that says, "Oh, who will I be if I'm not taking care of him?"

Let's pause for a moment because I'm saying some things and I'm wondering how they're landing.

It's complex because he tried to take his life two years ago. He's finally doing better now. And the way his dad takes care of him is different than the way I do.

Of course. So you're afraid he won't be taken care of, and he might take his life. And he's saying to you... I feel this because it's primal. It's in your core chakra, in your womb: "I have to keep him alive." And he's saying, "Mom, I've got to do it myself now."

All these parts of you that don't trust, that say he might die—all those are true. But you can't grow up if you don't face some danger. You don't become an independent person with your mom still there.

I think—thank you—I think where the double grief happens is that I've started to feel like it's because I'm a bad person. I'm not enough.

You're a bad mom. Didn't do enough. Okay. Close your eyes, and first check in: where do you feel the grief in your body?

Like here, in my chest.

And what's it feel like?

Like I'm locked up.

Feel the place that's locked up, the grief. Is it hot? Is it raging? Is it ice cold? What does it feel like, locked up? What's in there?

Like a volcano.

Okay, there's a volcano. So first, just feel the locked up place and the volcano with interest and care. You kind of need to do this because your son probably has some of it in himself too. So you have to learn how to do this. Feel it and wrap it with awareness, to say, "Okay, I feel this volcano happening"—of rage and pain and who knows what else is in there.

And now you're not running away from it. You're doing something very brave. You're actually bringing a respectful attention to it. And it has to be respectful, because this part of you is trying to protect you and your son.

First, you can simply say: Thank you. Thank you for holding all this, for trying to protect me. And see what happens when you do this. How does it respond?

It softens.

So feel that softening. If you were to let it come out, how big would it be? Would it be like a huge volcano, or would it be bigger? Get an image for it. Is it like a tornado? A hurricane? A nuclear explosion? What is it? How big?

Big. Enormous. Nuclear.

Yes. So feel that. And you can make space in your image, in your heart. See what it's like, right now, to just let all that energy have some space to explode—in grief and tears and rage and pain. You're actually making space with loving awareness, saying: This is what a mother's heart has been carrying.

What happens as you just allow it to be, let it open? What do you notice?

I feel gratitude to you. I feel a lot of gratitude.

And in yourself? Is it still there? It should be, probably.

Yeah, but it's less.

Now feel something else, and see if this is right. Underneath all the pain and volcanic rage and anger and fear and confusion and worry—you know why it's all there? Because you care. Because you care so much. You care for your son. You care for life. Feel that place of care that gives birth to all this: I won't let it happen. I have to protect him.

Feel the care underneath it all. How deeply you care. Do you? Is it true?

Yeah.

And that's what I would call a good mother. You could say you've been bad, but I see the care, and it's enormous.

Thank you.

So my recommendation to you is to make a ritual for yourself, and have it witnessed by someone you love. Do you have a good therapist?

Yeah.

Good—witnessed by your therapist, by close friends. Write a letter to your son saying: I set you free to find what you need. Your mother has done everything to care for you. I trust you. I love you. And I set you free. Because he needs that. He needs to find himself. He has to face his own dangers, or he'll never grow up.

Put it on the water, or light a candle and burn it. Have people witness it. Make a ritual that becomes an offering of love. Because this is one of the great things parents learn over the years: you love immensely. And then you have to set them free. Because they're not yours.

He's not yours. He's himself.

So make a ritual for yourself. And invite close people, make it beautiful, because this is a huge thing and you're ready for it. And he's saying, "Mom, I'm ready. I need this." And I think you're wise enough and brave enough to do it. How are you feeling?

"I really appreciate how you reframed what he needed, because I think I was interpreting it as his rejection of me, because I was bad, instead of seeing that it was him needing to break free. Really helpful."

Yes, I'm so grateful. Well, all right. Stay with this. Write down what we talked about. Make the ritual.

It's so interesting—I'm a twin. My twin brother broke away before I did. He just needed to get out. As soon as he could, he left. I still stay more connected. But he had to get away. And I missed him terribly. But he knew he had to do it. He just had to do it.

So, all right. Thank you, dear.

"Thank you so much, Jack."

Thank you.

So I want to pause here and offer gratitude to each person who spoke—to Priscilla and Susan and Pamela. We're all in this together. To Arisika, thank you, dear heart friend.

We have our sufferings, but we're also held in something greater. I read this beautiful song prayer from an Aboriginal elder in Australia. He said, "When you sleep, the star is working for you. When you sleep, the rocks are working for you. The whole world is working for you, even when you sleep." You're being held by something. We all are, by this earth. Our tears are held and our joy, the beauty and the aliveness of being human. Part of the aliveness is that we suffer too. And it's not a mistake. There have to be the opposites of day and night, joy and sorrow, beginnings and endings, birth and death.

We live in a world of ever-changing polarities, and everybody has gain and loss. Everybody gets praise and blame. Everybody has pleasure and pain. And who we are is that loving heart that can hold it all and navigate it and bless ourselves and the people we touch.

It's a pretty good gig, I think. Not easy. But anyway, I'm so glad to share with you.

CHAPTER 50

Reconciliation

Jack Kornfield · 1h45

> *In this heartfelt teaching delivered on October 7th, Jack Kornfield addresses the urgent need for reconciliation in a world marked by conflict—from personal relationships to global warfare. Drawing from his years at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery during the Vietnam War era, he shares how that community became a "zone of peace" and a living example of what's possible for humanity.*
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> *Kornfield presents the Buddha's seven-step process for reconciliation as found in the Vinaya: face-to-face encounter, deep listening, non-stubbornness, voluntary confession, decision by consensus, accepting the verdict of compassion, and covering mud with straw. He illustrates these principles through moving stories of restorative justice at San Quentin, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process, the Bereaved Mothers and Combatants for Peace in Israel-Palestine, and healing ceremonies among Indigenous communities.*
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> *The talk weaves together practical wisdom from the Dhammapada with contemporary examples, emphasizing that repair is possible even after profound harm. Kornfield invites listeners to examine their own conflicts and consider where they stand in the reconciliation process. The teaching concludes with Philip Moffitt's meditation on reconciliation—a prayer extending from families to nations to all beings—reminding us that the capacity for profound compassion lies within each of us, waiting to be awakened and shared.*

Good Monday evening to you.

I'm really happy to be able to teach again. As most of you know, I did Monday night teachings for more than thirty years, every week. And now, as I am in my eightieth year, I've cut back and I'm teaching once a month so that I could do other interesting things. But I still miss it, and it's such a pleasure to see you all.

What we do Monday nights is usually quite simple. We start with a meditation, which we'll do tonight, and then have a break—five minutes or so to stretch or relax—and then that's usually followed, as it will be, by some teachings, and maybe a brief meditation at the end of the teachings before we do some question and response.

Whatever brings you, just take a pause for a moment. I'm really glad we get to connect, because the invitation of this space, more than anything, is to remember—to remember what really matters, to remember what your heart knows, to remember the wisdom that was born in you that you carry.

So with that, let us begin with twenty minutes or so, maybe a little more, of meditation with a bit of guidance tonight. And I'll start us off with a bit of a story or an image.

During the years that I lived at my teacher Ajahn Chah's forest monastery, which is in the province of Ubon in Thailand that borders both Laos and Cambodia, it was during the period of the Vietnam-Cambodian-Laos War—the American War, anyway, with them. And there were warplanes that flew overhead, bombers and fighter jets. There was an air base in the province, not that far. And if I went to one of the monasteries right along the border, you could even see flashes at night of the fighting.

We had visitors. I remember a friend who came from Vietnam. He was part of a Quaker group doing peace work in the middle of the war. And he said, "How dare you stay here when there are all these people suffering?" He asked Ajahn Chah about that. Doesn't Ajahn Chah want to do something about it?

And Ajahn Chah's response was this. He said, "Wars come and go. They're a terrible thing. They cause tremendous suffering. And the Buddhist teachings are to see suffering and to find the path to free ourselves from suffering. And that means to make our own hearts a zone of peace. So this monastery is a zone of peace. In the war zones, people steal, they rob, they kill. Here, if you lose something, it's returned to you. If you're in trouble, someone reaches out. It is a completely safe and generous and kind and compassionate community. And we're at peace with the animals and the beasts of the forest. Come and taste it. Because we want to be a living library of what's possible for humanity, so we don't forget."

William Butler Yeats puts it this way: "We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather around us, that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life because of our quiet."

So with these words, let your eyes close gently and invite yourself to become a zone of peace.

If it's helpful, settle on your seat. Let yourself sink into the earth and feel the support right under you, fully supported. Take two long breaths. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, roll your head in a little circle to release your neck, and let it find a simple upright. Let the shoulders relax. The arms and hands rest easily. Let the belly be soft, the breath natural, and let the heart be soft as well—to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion.

And as you begin to quiet, invite a sense of peacefulness to arise. Yes, there will be thoughts that come and go, sensations of pleasure and pain in the body, emotions, memories. And there is a deep peace to be found in the midst of all of these, just here. Not an absence of thought.

but a spacious, peaceful heart, peaceful presence. Deep down you know this.

Let yourself remember or picture a time in your life when you were quite at peace. A moment, a day. You remember. You can feel it.

May I rest in peacefulness. With each breath, may peace arise. The out-breath returning to peacefulness, each breath. Steady.

May I become a zone of peace. May I have peace in my heart amidst all the things this heart carries. May I have peace amidst it all. May I have peace in my body. Let the body come to rest and ease, softening into stillness. May my mind be at peace. May I have peace in my mind.

Let the sense of peace expand like space, vast and open. Like the sky or the galaxy—boundless space and peace. And yes, there will be thoughts and troubles, pains and joys, emotions, all the parts of life rising and falling like waves in the ocean. And you are the vast space of peace. Relax into it. Trust it. Vast space and peace, timeless and open.

And sense now how you can move through your life with a peaceful and loving heart in the midst of it all. Feel it. Picture it. This is who you are.

And when you're ready, gently allow your eyes to open, carrying that spirit of stillness. May you have a peaceful heart.

Tonight I'd like to speak on a topic that I feel to be compelling at this time, because there's so much cry or call for compassion and dharma understanding in what's happening in our world. And this is the theme of reconciliation.

Now I know reconciliation also sounds like a Senate procedure, but it's a more humane procedure than that. And so, as I teach, it's not so much for you to believe or even learn, but perhaps to reflect and be reminded.

What do we do when there's conflict? Conflict is natural, you know, at times. It's just built into this kind of incarnation as animals on this earth. I mean, all you have to do is go and volunteer in a preschool, as I used to, and the kids would get in conflict. "It's my

toy." "That's not fair." "He got more cookies." "She did." One is hitting the other with a block. And then you get down on your knees and you say, "Use your words instead of the blocks." I wish we could say that to our global politicians. Use your words. And you ask, "What upset you? What hurts? What scared you?"

It happens—conflict—to all humans, including, shockingly, in spiritual communities.

I have seen that in the last fifty years. But when we pause and when we reflect, especially in these divided times—the political divisiveness and the longing for racial justice and the climate disruptions and all the other things that we might care about, now heightened in conflict—it invites us to pause and reflect on our values. On what matters.

In the Dhammapada, those verses of the Buddha: "One who seeks happiness by hurting others will never find happiness." How about that as a message to the world?

And today, of course, is also October 7th. It's the memorial day of that horrific violence that happened from the attack of Hamas on the Israeli settlers a year ago this day. And more than that, the beginning of the horrific war that has caused immense suffering on all sides and continues—and really tears at the heart if you look at it, as does the war in Ukraine and Sudan and Myanmar and so forth. But this one is right here somehow, in our screens and our laps and people we know. What are our values in the midst of this?

Here's Robert Kennedy—the other one, the one who ran for president in 1968 before he was assassinated, just to keep it straight. He was talking about our gross national product. He said it's measured to count prisons and nuclear warheads and advertising and cigarettes and the logging of our forests. "Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials"—that's a kind of quaint phrase, isn't it? "It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to one another in the country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

So we really have to reflect amidst all the conflict: What really matters?

Thich Nhat Hanh—one of his first books was *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. He talked about building the school for youth and social services and clinics during the war, not taking a stand between North and South Vietnam. Lots of the young people who were working with him were killed. And still he was a beacon of peace. That's what Dr. Martin Luther King uplifted him for, nominated him for the Nobel Prize.

I remember talking with Thay Thich Nhat Hanh. At one point I asked him why he has people smile and talk about joy so much. I see him holding hands and working with children, the new generation. And he said, "Because I'm so sad. Because I've suffered so much, I have to choose joy. I have to water the seeds of peace. This is what I've chosen to do with my life—to water the seeds of peace and joy."

There are several accounts of the Buddha trying to stop conflict in his time in northern India. There were battles and warfare between the Sakyas and the Kosalas and so forth. At least a couple of times he went out and stood in the middle of the marching armies on the battlefield. At one point he stood in front of one of the armies that was going to go and sack the other kingdom. The conflict was over water—which we will have, alas, more of those in our climate change time. And he said, "I need to ask you a question. Which is more precious, water or blood?" And somehow he asked it with so much concern and compassion that at least one time the army turned back. Not every time. But it did.

So where are you with conflict? What are the conflicts in your life? What are the conflicts around you that touch you? And how do you navigate the conflicts in your life? Human beings have struggled with this question of conflict for thousands of years.

And our brains are wired, tuned toward the things that are conflictual—the negativity bias, what's scary, what might cause trouble, what we might lose, all of those kinds of things.

There was an organization started in the sixties or seventies in Palo Alto called A Better Game Than War. The notion of it was—I think Joan Baez was a part of it—that conflict is natural, competition is natural. Think of the Olympics. How can we get human beings to use the impulse of competition and conflict in a healthier way? Of course, the Olympics are an example. Maybe at best the space race was meant to be this. But it posed a question for us as human beings: How do we do this? We need a new model or a new set of values.

And of course, it's interesting to see in this highly politicized moment, certainly in the United States, that politics are in some way ritualized warfare. The Democrats and the Republicans don't have tanks and fighter planes to go to Washington and take over the Capitol. It's being done in other forms, but it is a ritualized way of trying to deal with conflict and come to a resolution—or come out on top. Let's pay attention to it and what we might do to steer our humanity in a healthy way.

When I was some years ago in Palestine and Israel doing peace work, I met with the bereaved mothers. I met with the former combatants for peace, and they were on both sides—Palestinian commandos, Israeli officers. I had the most moving time being with the Sulha. It was part of a group that brought teenagers from Palestine and Israel together, starting when they were young, when they were nine or ten, and continuing as they became teens, to learn about each other. After five years, they became so bonded. They would say, "Why would we fight each other?" And their parents came at the end, kind of shocked to see what their children had found. It's hard to hate up close. And that's what happened.

Van Jones, the commentator on CNN and a social activist and a brilliant, wonderful friend—he did an interesting thing. He was very much involved with the problem of the fentanyl and opioid deaths, this huge epidemic that's still ongoing. He got a grant and brought a group of people from Southern California—liberal parents, immigrant parents. This was a group who had all lost children to the epidemic, whose children had died. And he flew them to West Virginia and invited them to sit in a room in a big circle with a number of folks from West Virginia who were culturally much more conservative—religiously, politically, in all kinds of ways.

They sat together, kind of looking at each other with whatever they were thinking. And then he asked everyone to take out the one thing he made sure they brought with them: the picture of their child who had died. Place it in front of them or hold it up and say their name before anything else happened. And of course, everything changed. There weren't conservatives and liberals and immigrants and old families. There were just parents looking at each other's eyes saying, "Oh, my daughter, my son—me too, us." And the profound care we have for one another.

I tell these stories because stories make our future. As the poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." And what are the stories that we carry of what's possible?

Even in spiritual communities, it happens, as I said, that there are wee bits of conflict—or more. Once, a long time ago, the Buddha spent a rains retreat with the monks in the forest at the Kosambi Monastery, and a conflict arose. The story is told that it was between the Vinaya master, the master of decorum, and the master of recitation, two of the leaders in the community, about how people were supposed to behave. They became really heated. Many took sides, though some refused. But it got more and more heated, and the lay supporters were upset and beseeched the Buddha to call them in. He heard them describe all the ill-used words and the wounds and so forth—a serious blow to the harmony of his community.

And you know what happened? The Buddha sat with them and tried to work with them. They didn't listen. If you're a parent, you know this, right? They didn't listen even to the Buddha. He tried, and the conflict continued, and they were fighting. And finally he said, "I'm leaving."

He told no one. So I just contradicted myself—he absented himself. He turned away and walked into the forest with a couple of monks who were close to him and spent three months away. He said they were really happy months. He was out with the animals, the elephants, with the phases of the moon and the movement of the leaves and the wind and the quiet of the forest, meditating.

Three months later he returned and asked, "How is it?" And they said the conflict was worse, if anything. They continued to argue. And the lay disciples got really angry. They were so upset. They said, "You drove the Buddha away. We're not even going to offer you food anymore. You've got to get it together."

So how to do so? As the story is told, the Buddha called them all together, but he said, keep them separate, one side from the other. And here are the teachings of how to resolve, how to bring some resolution—the seven steps that are needed for reconciliation. As I talk about them, you can more than anything feel what they speak to in your life, or the life of the people around you, or the world around you.

The first step in this seven-step process of reconciliation is called face to face—bringing people all together so that it undercuts the private conversations where everybody builds up their legal case and makes it worse, and instead brings people together. They actually have to be in the same place because something happens when you're actually there face to face.

I was reading recently in a book on forgiveness, a story of parents who were going into the court for the sentencing of a man, a drunk driver who had a history of drinking and driving, who crashed and killed their two daughters. He was a young man. The mother walked into the court and she saw the family of the young man who had driven the car that killed her daughters. She saw the sorrowful eyes of his mother and she couldn't help herself. She just walked right over to her and wrapped her arms around her and they both wept. Because they all suffered. Face to face—hard to hate up close.

When I was doing couples therapy, there was a couple in considerable conflict, you might say, who came to see me. We were sitting there and I welcomed them and they told me a tiny bit about what was happening, just a tiny bit. And I said, "Well, we need to make a space where there can be some real listening to each other. Why don't you get in a position where you feel safe to talk about what's going on?" Immediately the wo-

man stood up, walked out to the other end of the room, and slammed the door shut. I had to smile. Okay, that's safe. And then she opened the door and you could see her eye peeking in through the little crack. But that's where we began. I said, "Stay there. All right, you can talk from out there if that's what makes you safe."

The first step is to bring ourselves together in some way where we feel safe. And then the next step is called deep listening. This is also called remembering with clarity and curiosity. Instead of being in your position in conflict, you lean in with mindfulness and interest and care and say, "I want to know exactly what it was like. Tell me—what did you feel? What did you think? What did you do? What did you see?" There's something about the listening, and each person speaking their truth, whatever it is, that has an enormous power to release the ways that we're caught.

In India, there is a saying or a practice called the act of truth. When you're in real trouble, you can make a ritual act of truth. And when you make that ritual act of truth, it will change things. The story is told of a family where their young child was very, very sick. The doctors had come and they could do nothing. This child, this daughter or son, was in a coma, and the parents were, as parents could be, terrified and lost. And there was a traveling yogi, a sadhu, who came through, and they said, "Well, maybe he has some mantras, some magic that can help our child."

And he came and he tried his mantras, and nothing happened. And finally he said, "Well, I'm afraid the only thing that will work is an act of truth. Do you agree?" And they agreed.

And as he got quiet, he said, "My truth is that I'm not a very good yogi, that I cheat on my vows, that I've not kept them. And by telling this truth, may your daughter be healed." And her eyes opened. She started to awaken.

Then he looked to the father. And the father said, "You know I have a business. But my truth is to tell my wife that it's not a very good business. I'm not doing well. I haven't been so honest. And by this act of truth, may my daughter be healed." And she sat up.

And then his wife turned to him and said, "My act of truth is that I've not been happy in this marriage. We need to change things radically. I pretended to be happy, but not in my heart."

And then the daughter stood up and looked at them like, whoa, what's been happening here?

It's called an act of truth. Face to face, telling the truth, deep listening.

The next principle is called non-stubbornness. I would know nothing about this except for that little part of me that loves to be right. You know how it is, all of us—my opinions, how I believe things, how I've seen them. And the Buddha talks a lot about this. He talks about clinging to views. Those who cling to views, he said, go around the world annoying other people. It's one of the vaguely humorous phrases you find in the texts. "Moi?" says Miss Piggy. Yes, you too. Those who cling to views annoy one another. It's not about being right. It's about whether you want to listen and connect and love.

Bryan Stevenson, the great activist in the South who worked in prisons, who helped build the memorial to all the lynchings that happened—an extraordinary being—he talks about something called undeserved mercy, that even those he worked with who've done the worst things, they too deserve mercy.

This is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their heart?"

And the wild thing is, when you do the work of Byron Katie, that kind of inner questioning, one of her most important four questions is: What if the opposite were true? She'll ask what you believe, what your story is, and then she says, try it on. What if the opposite were true?

Non-stubbornness. The valuing of others' perspectives. The valuing of their experience. And the valuing of their pain. Even the undeserved mercy.

Then comes voluntary confession. And it has to be voluntary. But it's really, really important. It's that sense of acknowledgment of someone's part in it. And it's really the basis for restorative justice that we'll talk about.

There's a book called *A Human Being Died That Night* by the South African leader Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. She was very much involved in the South African truth and reconciliation process, quite an extraordinary woman.

And she wanted to understand how it could have been so terrible, how people could have treated each other, killed each other, tortured each other, burned their villages, their homes, their children. How could they do this?

One of the things she describes was going into the maximum security prison where Eugene de Kock was held—the mastermind of the apartheid killings, the worst of them. She wanted to meet with him, and she did over some months, sitting there with him, simply asking him to talk, and listening.

The denouement of the book comes on the day she went in and found him with his head down. He had obviously been reflecting, carrying his own karmic burden. He looked at her and said, "We killed so many. What for? They killed a lot. What for? We fought for nothing. We could have all gone out and had a meal. If we put the politicians and their children on the front line, they wouldn't do it. Why did we do this?" He lowered his head in grief.

And I think for her, as she wrote about it, that was one of the great moments she needed for healing. A voluntary confession.

Restorative justice is this remarkable movement in which people who have been victims of violent crimes—mostly—choose, with proper support and training and understanding, to sit down with those who perpetrated those violent crimes. And often it's actually young people who are caught up in it. So there's a whole movement of restorative justice. San Quentin is one of the models of it, but there are many other places. My friend Sujata Malika is one of the mainstays of it.

In San Quentin, I believe it was, there was a woman named Radha. She couldn't speak to the young man who killed her son because he was killed, but she was trying, like Pumla, to understand how human beings could shoot or kill or destroy another life. And so in the restorative justice process, she asked to meet with some of the men on death row, lifers in San Quentin who had killed young people, who had committed murder.

She was taken in by a guide, someone who understood restorative justice. And she talked about her son, Chris, and how he had been shot at age twenty-one for nothing. She talked and they talked. And they made a connection. She started to visit them and listen to them and understand the tragedy of their stories, which in many cases were immense—just like most of the women in maximum security prisons who committed murder are there, almost all of them, because they were terribly abused. And she heard all these stories.

The next year was to be the anniversary—the fifth anniversary or whatever it was—of the killing of her son. And the men she had been meeting with in San Quentin asked her to come in on that day. They had all cut pieces out of their blue prison uniforms and stitched them together, making a quilt of atonement and love. They stitched with their hands his name and the date, and then peace doves and flowers and prayers.

When she came in, they said, "We have something to give you." They unwrapped it and wrapped it around her and said, "Not only do we who have been killers ask your forgiveness, but we ask your understanding."

And this is the Holy Grail, really. This is what allows people who have been in conflict to see each other with the sacred eyes of humanity.

A voluntary confession, then decision by consensus. In the monastic context, that meant all the other monks or nuns around in this process, but here it means the support of your family, your teacher, your therapist, your community, the exemplars who nod and say yes. Turning toward peace is exactly what is needed. We support you. We uphold you. We have your back. We are with you with all the courage that you take to do this.

And then there is accepting the verdict. The elders are asked for their view on how it should be resolved. And it is always the verdict of compassion. Can you feel the compassion? And are you willing to change?

You can reflect on this in your own life. Can you feel the great heart of compassion for all?

Are you willing to let go and change and reconcile in your heart—to not put anyone out of your heart?

And finally, there is the stage of covering mud with straw. All the mud and the blood and the pain is now covered by straw. In that formal process, the elders, the most respected monks and nuns, speak. And in your own life, you can imagine: What would the Dalai Lama feel? What would Archbishop Tutu or Aung San Suu Kyi on her best day say to you in your conflict? What would they whisper in your ear, remind you of, tell you?

Again, it's like a woman who came to see me who was in the midst of a terrible divorce. The husband who was divorcing her, who'd had a number of affairs, was not only trying to keep the money but lying about her as a mother and trying to keep the

children. It was one of those really painful and messy situations. We talked about her getting the best lawyer she could, which she did, and protecting herself, which she also did.

And then she came in one day and said, "My ex is telling my children all kinds of bad things about me." And she said, "I will not retaliate." She sat up and declared, "I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children." It was like an act of truth. It had such courage and power in it. She simply would not play that game, would not go into that conflict to cause harm. "I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children."

So some questions for you who are listening. Where are you in this story? In your own life, where are you? Are you in that position like the Buddha where no one will listen to you? It could happen. Are you one of the stubborn monks? Are you one of the bystanders, the disgusted lay people who don't even want to feed the monks anymore because they're so lost in their conflict? Are you one of the few who didn't take sides? Think of conflict in your life. Are you listening deeply with your heart, not putting anyone out of your heart? Are you willing to cover mud with straw?

I was the peacemaker in our family. Four brothers—we each had different roles. My parents fought a lot. My father was abusive and violent, a wife batterer. I tried to make peace. I still do it for a living.

And I remember being with my father when he was in the hospital toward the end of his life. Talking to him, he mentioned something about my mom. They'd been divorced for probably fifteen years, but they were married for thirty. And I shook my head and said, "You know, it's still hard for Mom because of the way you treated her." And he said, "Treated her?" And I said, "Yeah. The times you hit her and got really violent with her." And he looked at me—it was a kind of amazing moment. He couldn't even remember. He couldn't even let himself see.

But whatever he remembered or didn't, I'm not going to carry the legacy of bitterness. I had my reconciliation with him. Grief and pain. And then what? It's not the end of the story.

Reconciliation is hard. It brings us close to where we're truly vulnerable. But we need it—in our families, in our communities. More broadly, you know, the USA is still fighting the Civil War.

It really is. Fear, laws, white power, supremacy—all of it. Fear of immigrants. We're still fighting the Civil War, with all the racism and tropes that came from that, still acting upon us.

We need reconciliation. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process was so remarkable. Twenty-two thousand victims came forward and spoke. Seven thousand hearings for amnesty were held for people who agreed to say what they had done, who were willing to face up to it. It didn't fix everything, but it was a start. It was the beginning of asking: What does it mean to see each other with the eyes of compassion for the life that we carry?

And the amazing thing is that repair is possible. "He beat me. He robbed me. He threw me down," says the verse in the Dhammapada. Perpetuate those thoughts and you live in hate. "He beat me. He robbed me. He threw me down"—let go of those thoughts and live in love. We have all suffered. Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

Repair is possible. I think of an old acquaintance from years ago, Jane Middleton-Moz, a psychologist and community ritual organizer. She's part Native American, Anishinaabe. She told the story of working, I think in Southern Canada, with a Native community that had been decimated—the children stolen and taken to boarding schools, forbidden to speak their language, beaten, abused. The parents who lost their children.

She said, "We need a council." And she brought them all together. The council had three rings. In the middle were the younger generation, children now living in that community. Around them sat their parents—the ones who had been taken to those terrible schools. And around the outside ring were the grandparents.

She asked them each, in turn, to tell their stories. The grandparents told what it was like to have their children taken from them—the sorrows they carried, how it completely upended their lives and community. The parents told what it was like to be torn from their families and carried off, beaten, mistreated. And then the children in the middle said, "Oh, now we understand better what happened to you."

As is true in that Native community, when there is this kind of reconciliation, this coming together, there is gift-giving. This was the telling of truth, the acts of truth. And from the outside of the circle, one of the grandmothers spoke: "Since my daughter was taken, I have never woven our sacred blankets. But after these stories today, I speak to you children—I will teach you how to weave."

One of the parents said, "You know I don't come out of my house because I only drink. I drink since I came back from when they carried me away and took my language and my life. You know I'm a drunkard. But I look at you, next generation, and now that you know what happened to me, I pledge to you—I will never take another drink. This is my gift to you."

Elders and parents in the circles gazed at their children, telling the acts of truth and then offering: "I will teach you to make baskets again, the baskets that hold our people together." And the children drank it in. They could hear it. They could feel it, because it was the medicine that was truly needed.

Repair is possible.

Reconciliation is possible.

Leymah Gbowee, who along with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the Nobel Peace Prize—these women from Liberia—they said that Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers. Now it's known for its women leaders.

Human beings can learn. We can grow. We have the capacity to see one another with compassion. This is what all of our practice is about—in your family, in your community, in the political world, in the world of war. Remember. See it. Feel it.

The Hutus and the Tutsis have somehow come to live together. The Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, after years of conflict, have come to live together.

True love, says the Mahabharata, is not for the faint-hearted. The Bhagavad Gita explains: if you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who return love for hate.

No one knows how old humanity is, but we can all agree we're old enough to know better.

It's time. It's time to become wise. It's time to carry something deeper—something we can offer one another to plant the seeds of reconciliation in our lives, in politics, in community, in family, in the arts that we're a part of.

Oh nobly born, says the Buddha, remember who you really are. Remember the Buddha nature within you, the capacity for profound compassion.

Others will be cruel. We shall be kind. Thus we will incline the heart.

Others will kill or harm living beings. We shall not do so. We shall care for them and cherish them. Thus we will incline the heart.

Others will take what does not belong and steal. We will not do so. We will be generous. Thus we shall incline the heart.

Others will speak maliciously or speak false words. We shall tell the truth. Thus we shall incline the heart.

Others will be arrogant. We shall find humility. Thus we will incline the heart.

Others will be careless. We will be mindful and attentive. Thus we will incline the heart.

Others will lack wisdom. We will cultivate and awaken our wisdom. Thus we will incline the heart.

It's there in the world. Through the struggle that they have endured, Northern Ireland has found some part of this. We can too. Liberia has found it.

You, each of you—you and I—we carry the seeds of a new world, of a possible world. This talk doesn't give an answer to what and how and exactly what you should do, because the answer lies in your heart. Reconciliation—in your family, in your community, in all that you touch.

You carry beautiful seeds. Water them.

May all mothers and daughters be reconciled. May all mothers and sons be reconciled. May all fathers and sons be reconciled. May all fathers and daughters be reconciled. May all sisters and brothers be reconciled. May all partners and lovers be reconciled. May all husbands and wives be reconciled. May all family members be reconciled. May all employers and employees be reconciled. May all community members be reconciled. May all men and women be reconciled. May all religions be reconciled. May all races be reconciled. May all nations be reconciled. May all creatures be reconciled. May all beings in every form find reconciliation and peace.

Thank you. Thank you for your reflections and your sincerity. This was not one of those talks filled with jokes and humor, but it feels like a teaching that the heart needs to remember and inhabit and carry in these times. There is a possibility of love and redemption, and it is one of the most beautiful things that can happen.

We have a bit of time for reflections, observations, questions.

Was this helpful? I see Linda's hand. Linda, if you would like to unmute and speak.

"Hi, Jack. As I was listening tonight, I was thinking about a number of conflicts in a number of different categories and capacities—family members, politics, countries. And I was wondering, is it possible for us to keep our heart open and to look for reconciliation if it's not mutually accepted? I mean, I can't resolve the conflicts in Ukraine or in Israel-Palestine or other places, but I can hold my heart open. What would you say?"

First, I'm listening to you and appreciating that you can hold your heart open, because there's so much suffering in Ukraine and Russia, there's so much suffering in Israel and Palestine. How could we not see it? And then it's not up to us to be able to have the wand to make it go away. Some people won't even agree with that—they say you have to hate that side or that side. But I hear you saying that's not what you're doing. Is that correct?

"Yes, yes."

So then you're asking, is it possible to hold that openness and not have people agree that they should follow your wishes and do it? They don't necessarily follow what you're saying, but you feel it. So close your eyes for a moment and just tune in. Let yourself answer your question, because you know. What does your heart wisdom say?

"My heart wisdom says that I feel like I'm holding the sadness for so many in so many different areas. And I want to keep my heart open and not be taken in by one perspective or another. But the sadness is that the suffering continues. And it's not just frustrating—it's something that's so heavy on my heart. I don't always know where to put all of the emotion of that."

Yes. So first, the wisdom that you're holding it all and not getting caught up in one side or the other. And now what's asked of you is to embody the great heart of compassion.

You have to become Dr. King. You have to become Gandhi. You have to say, "I let this be. I look this in the eye. I see it. I feel it. And who I am is bigger than this."

Because even as you feel the great heart of compassion which holds all the tears and suffering, it's not the whole story. Today there are a billion people making love and planting gardens, and billions of people feeding their children, and billions of people doing beautiful things. You can forget it, and then the heart can get kind of colonized by just the tragedy. But actually, the great heart of compassion knows both.

"Oh, I loved your answer. Thank you."

Another practitioner shared: "Thank you for tonight's talk. It's like my thoughts exploded all over the screen. Having been on this planet, meandering into putting one toe into the next decade—the eighth one, I'm not there yet, but I'm in there—I know that the same thing happens over and over and over. People are always making gardens and feeding children and making love and building, and people are always fighting and tearing down. And it is what it is.

"The only thing I can do is live in a state of hope, keeping my heart open, my eyes open, my ears open, and living with the knowledge that there's nothing I can do by myself. But if I join a sangha, a program, a group—there's always love. There's always love. There's always the people that are going to burn crosses on my front lawn perfectly happily, but I don't have to speak to them. I can just smile and acknowledge their presence and say, thank you for sharing.

"I just know that if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten. And I believe that we're okay. We're okay. And I know that there is so much sorrow and so much joy. To live in the balance of it all is the best I can do."

It's good to see you. I feel myself in this very tender space tonight, hearing you speak, the conversations we've been having, and the tenderness of your heart that's open to all this, and the wisdom you spoke. I couldn't imagine it being said better. That's as good as it gets. You've just given a beautiful gift to us.

Another practitioner raised his hand: "My story is this. I live in Berkeley, California, which is a liberal enclave. All my friends are other progressives and liberals. And I've had it in mind for a while to try and have an interaction with a Trump supporter. About twenty miles up from my town—a place called Lafayette, if you're in the Bay Area you know where I'm going—there's a bridge across the freeway. Typically a lot of Trump supporters will be there waving flags and Trump signs. I plan on going out there, and after I get through what I'm doing, I was thinking about just walking up to one of the people and saying, 'Gee, I'd like to talk with you.'"

I don't want to argue. I don't want any conflicts or anything. I just want to ask: How come you believe this? How come you believe that?

So that's all well and good. But what I got from your talk tonight is that I have an underground intention of fixing them, of changing them, and somehow making them awake to what's going on. The Berkeley consciousness, of course.

Well, it's not just Berkeley—there are a lot of us. Progressives, yes.

So I think it might be a little difficult for me to walk up to some of these people and just come from a pure place of really wanting to know. To ask questions like, "Suppose you deport eleven million people—who's going to pick the crops?" But not from a place of wanting to change them. From a much more open place. I'm going to have to work on that. I'm going to have to play around with that during the week. I'm going on Friday, actually. So I want to thank you for that.

What you're saying underneath it is about something much deeper—trying to understand. "Help me understand how you see it." I don't even think the specific questions—"you're going to throw out the immigrants"—that almost sounds like an accusation. "Help me understand how you look at immigration. What do you think should happen? Help me understand."

With that kind of open-hearted curiosity, people will feel it. On the other hand, you're quite accurate. If you go in with a little edge, really wanting to convince them—that's not going to get you very far.

And who knows? They might have some things you can learn from, because you don't hear that side. "Tell me, how does this affect your family, your children? What's your vision? Tell me. Let me listen."

Yes, learning to phrase it in a much more open and connective way rather than my underground wanting to fix them.

And then what's your intention in doing it? That was a very good question, because what came up all of a sudden was wanting to help myself let go of some of the anger and ill will and resentment.

Well, if you're honest with that and say, "I want to talk because I've been afraid or resentful, and I realize I don't understand. I need to understand better"—that's a beautiful intention. It makes you vulnerable, but it's honest.

Good luck. No—it's not good luck. It's good skill.

Yes, it's good skill and good heart.

When we approach each other with our minds already made up—which of course I would have no experience of, but people like you do that anyway—it's a little like when you sign up for something online and you can't go any further until you read all the fine print. There's like four pages of fine print with a little accept button at the end. And you just scroll down and press accept. But you've never actually read it or listened.

We can listen to each other that way. Like we're just going to press the accept button. Okay, and now I have my case.

But there's something that happens if we get quiet, like Ernie did for a moment, and ask: What's our best intention? What's the intention underneath it? For him it was to undo his resentment and his anger and the distance he created—which is another way of saying learning how to love. But that's the question for us: What's our real deepest intention?

A participant named Toby raised a question: "I feel so deeply about the sadness that's taking place in this world at this time. And I think like everybody else, I feel hopeless or at least helpless at times. Is it a conceit to feel that if we treat each other—because I feel we're so deeply connected—if we treat each other individually with kindness and openness, that it has an effect that will ultimately make some changes, if not as global as we might wish?

"Because in my experience—and I'm older than you, so I've had a lot of experience—I've met very many different kinds of people, and yet I have found they have all wanted the same thing. They have wanted to thrive. They have wanted to be seen. And when that happens, nobody says, are you Jewish or Palestinian? Are you conservative or liberal? Because in that moment, that connection is more profound than the differences. So my feeling is: if I can do this as much as possible on an individual basis with a true heart—not to be altruistic, but because I see it and feel it—is that enough?"

You posed the question two ways. Is it enough? Enough for what? I don't know. "Will it make a difference?" was a different way you framed it.

What you're talking about, I really respect. Close your eyes for a second. Just do a little reflection. Imagine that you're in a school system where all the children are being instructed to fight and battle and be angry with one another. That's how they're being taught—we should always fight and be first and be the best and put other people down. And this starts to grow in the community.

Would that affect the world if people have those kinds of instructions and thoughts?

Yes.

You're sure, aren't you?

Yes.

So your question kind of reversed it.

Now you're picturing, all right, suppose in a society there are a number of people who foster respect and connection, people who make others feel like they're being understood and cared for—will that spread? Will it grow? Will it change things? We don't know how much or how long, but does it make any difference? I think so.

If you put a violin on a table and have a violin in your hand and you play it, what happens to the violin on the table? The strings resonate, you know, the very same notes. You can't not make a difference because they're part of you. Now we have all these different parts, as Solzhenitsyn said—our heart contains all these. But if that's the seeds you water, if that's what you bring into this world...

I love what you said. You've seen people over all these decades and they all want to be seen and respected, to feel a connection. The beautiful thing tonight is people are just speaking wisdom and we get to drink it in.

One of the most amazing things I've seen is that it's true whether a child is five or somebody is eighty-five—there's that moment when that look comes and that brightness in the eyes that says, "Ah, you saw me." And you approved, or at least did not disapprove. It's a hope that it spreads sufficiently, and I don't know. We can't know. But at least you feel it has enough value that in its own self, it's something to pursue.

When you look back at your life, that's what you'll be glad you did. That's really what mattered.

This is a beautiful way to end tonight. Quite lovely and uplifting. May we all carry this spirit and illuminate. It is a little bit of a tough time, and we are tender and we need a big heart of compassion. What Toby said was wonderful—such beautiful medicine.

Let's just sit quietly again for half a minute. And remember how powerful it is to be seen and loved. That's really the great power in the world. More than any. The power of love. And you have it and carry it. And can live it.

CHAPTER 51

Essential Teachings for Changing Times

Jack Kornfield · 1h37

> *In this heartfelt talk delivered shortly after a contentious election, Jack Kornfield guides practitioners back to the fundamental teachings that sustain us through difficulty. Beginning with a guided meditation on mindful loving awareness, he invites listeners to step out of 'the tyranny of time' and reconnect with the vast, timeless dimension of consciousness itself.*
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> *Kornfield explores the three marks of existence—anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anattā (not-self)—as essential wisdom for navigating change. Drawing on the story of Nelson Mandela's extraordinary compassion toward his former prison guard, poetry from William Carlos Williams and others, and the Aboriginal elder's teaching that 'the earth's sole vocation is to astonish,' he illuminates how these ancient truths offer genuine freedom. He references Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that 'this body is not me, I am life without boundaries' and the Bhagavad Gītā's wisdom about acting without attachment to outcomes.*
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> *The talk culminates in a profound exploration of the three refuges—Buddha (our awakened nature), Dhamma (the truth of how things are), and Saṅgha (community). Kornfield emphasizes that we are never alone, supported by countless beings and the wisdom lineage of teachers like Harriet Tubman, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. Through tender exchanges with practitioners holding grief about the election and fear for vulnerable loved ones, he demonstrates how compassionate presence itself becomes the teaching—showing that our freedom lies in choosing how we respond, planting seeds of goodness, and holding the world together with love.*

Thank you, Emiko. And thank you, everybody who's joining. It's good to see your faces as I scroll through the squares. Many dear friends, perhaps a few new folks, all good.

Here we are. Big changes afoot. And what would be useful to do and to talk about? I was trying to think about that for tonight, because I'm aware that there have already been dozens of brilliant analyses of what happened in the election from different points of view, from the triumphant to the tear-jerking and catastrophic. I'm sure some of you have read all of that. And then there's been all the advice-giving: if you're grieving or if you're dancing in triumph, here's how you take care of yourself in times of change. You meditate, you go out in nature, you take tea with other people, you make community, you make music and art, you read poetry.

A lot of what politics has done—and it's not new, actually, it's part of the political playbook—is to encourage our fear. That's how it works. Trying to make you afraid so you'll vote for somebody or other. And behind it are trauma cycles. People feeling nervous and upset in times of change. Some disenfranchised, some concerned and compassionate, some really afraid in other ways, because it does fuel fear. And you'll have your grief and your triumph and you'll be fed all of this. Then we have all our emotions that come with it—our anxiety and the stories and the thoughts.

But it's hard to see clearly when we're frightened or angry. In some way, what this time also calls for is to be able to take a step back, center, see anew with the heart, the eyes of understanding, and a kind of wisdom. That's the direction I'd like us to go tonight.

What's also true is that mindful loving awareness—and we'll do a sitting in just a couple of minutes—mindful loving awareness is big enough to hold all of this. Praise and blame, gain and loss, triumph and defeat. It's big enough to hold the fact that it's Veterans Day, when we celebrate in some strange way, and now it could get almost tearful, the succession of battles and wars, one after another. We've had a lot of them because the United States is also warlike in its history. Many, many wars. This is what human beings are doing regularly on the planet.

And today, there were 200,000 people who died. Let that in. People holding them and grieving in tears, young and old. And there were 250,000 new people who came in today and were born. It's wild.

Here we are, with all these different swings—whether it's politics or emotions, the possibilities of how we live together, the difficulties that we make for one another. In the Dharma, the teachings of wisdom invite us to take a breath, to release the body of fear, and to recognize that the world is not a problem to solve but a living organism, a living being to which we belong. We are part of the rhythms of all of life. We are the consciousness that has come at this time.

As in the Tao, where everything has its season, mindful loving awareness says: take your seat with an open heart and a bigger perspective. Step out of the tyranny of time—what just happened, what happened before that, what will happen, which we don't know but we have some imagination about—and step into the timeless reality of love and presence and a vast vision.

I should mention that Trudy told me I wasn't being compassionate enough when I told her what I was going to talk about. That could be true, and if so, I apologize. I'll do my best. One has to listen to one's spouse, at least somewhat.

So let yourself settle and take this seat halfway between heaven and earth, in this human incarnation you were given, with its praises and blames and joys and sorrows, with gain and loss and success and failure, with sweet and sour and beginning and end and hot and cold. This is the world of the play of opposites.

Allow, if you will, your eyes to close gently. Feel your body centered on the seat. You can sink down into the seat, into the earth, in a steady way. You belong here. The world is a living being to which you belong. Once you settle down, feel a stable and centered presence. Take a couple of long breaths.

Here we take our seat in the midst of all things.

The one seed at the center of the universe that is our seed.

Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Perhaps again, circle your head a little bit to release your neck. Let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the hands and arms rest easily. Relax your weight into the seat and feel how you're completely met and supported, steady on this earth.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion. And let yourself rest in a quiet and open loving awareness.

This mindful loving awareness can feel your body breathe. The earth is breathing you. You are part of this breathing earth. Relax into it. Trust it.

Let the same loving attention expand to the whole of your body. All the pleasures and pains, all the experiences of inhabiting a human form, held in loving kindness and loving awareness. This mysterious human body and human incarnation held in loving kindness and loving awareness doesn't need to be fixed or changed. All of it held in kindness, just as it is.

Allow the loving kindness and awareness to also notice all the feelings and emotions of the heart. The longing and love and grief and fear. The excitement and tenderness. So many feelings—the worry, the anger, the compassion. Holding it all with loving kindness. Nothing to fix. Nothing to change. Simply the beautiful loving presence.

There are tears. There's laughter and joy. There's excitement and worry. And a hundred other feelings rise and fall like waves in the ocean. And you are the loving kindness, the loving awareness that holds it all.

With the same loving kindness, you can notice the energy of the mind—the stream of thoughts and plans, ideas and worries and imaginings, analysis, understandings, stories, images. A river of thoughts and feelings, a river of images and words. You can hold it all with loving kindness and say thank you. Thank you for trying to figure it out and take care of me, plan the future, make it all good. Thank you for all that work. I'm okay just now. You can relax. And let the mind begin to quiet, held in loving kindness.

You are not the sensations of the body. You are not the waves of feelings and emotions that rise for a time and transform and fall away to another. You are not the thoughts or images of the mind. You are consciousness itself. Mindful loving awareness. A consciousness that knows all of these experiences. Vast. Timeless. Spacious. Mindful, loving awareness. A space of knowing, witnessing.

Loving awareness can hold it all with tenderness and wonder—the whole town, the seasons as they turn, elections that come and go, whole nations and civilizations that arise for a time and pass. You are the witness, consciousness itself, loving awareness. You see the mystery of rising and passing and hold it all with love, for that's what it is.

And when you open your eyes, you get to play your role, your dance in the drama. But you know that who you are is so much bigger, beyond all this. You are consciousness itself. Rest in it. Remember—consciousness and love.

So this evening, I want to speak to the basics of the teachings offered in the Buddhist tradition, but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. It seems in times of change and disruption, we can get engaged in all the complexity of it, and we can have all our emotions and thoughts and worries activated. But there's something more fundamental that I believe and know deeply can guide us through complicated times.

And these basics, first, want us to tend to our own heart and mind—to find a way to quiet your mind, to tend your heart, keep it steady and loving. And the amazing thing is that this is possible.

After becoming president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela asked some of his bodyguards to go with him for a walk in town. Then they went for lunch at a local restaurant and sat at a central table. The waiter brought their menus. At that moment, Mandela realized that at a table right in front of theirs, there was a single man waiting to be served.

When the man was served, Mandela told one of his bodyguards, "Go ask that man to join us." So the bodyguard went and transmitted the invitation. The man stood up, took his plate, and sat down next to Mandela. While eating, his hands were constantly shaking, and he didn't lift his head from the food. When they finished, he waved without even looking directly into Mandela's eyes. Mandela shook his hand, and the man walked away.

One of his guards said, "Madiba, that man must be very sick. His hands wouldn't stop shaking while he was eating."

"Not at all," Mandela replied. "The reason for his tremor is another." They looked at him quizzically, and he said, "That man was the guardian of the jail where I was locked up. Often after the torture I was subjected to, I screamed or cried for water. And he came to humiliate me. He laughed at me, and instead of giving me water, he urinated on my head. He wasn't sick. He was scared and shaking, perhaps fearing that I, now the president of the country, would send him to jail and do the same things he did to me—torturing and humiliating him. But that's not me. That behavior is not part of my character, nor of my ethics. Minds that seek revenge destroy states and humans, while those that seek reconciliation build nations and well-being."

So when we're invited to tend to our own hearts and mind, Nelson Mandela really reminds us that this is our birthright, that this is possible for us.

In addition to tending our own hearts, then, like a bodhisattva, we have to open and listen to the cries, the fears, and the dreams of the others around us. And there's a lot of fear now. These are from people who feel not respected or not included, people worried that they will not be, worried about what will happen to them.

I remember seeing a beautiful Tibetan thangka of the sage Milarepa.

And he was sitting there clad in his white cotton, with one hand cupping his ear in a gesture of the Bodhisattva who listens to the cries of the world—so that after we quiet the mind and tend our heart, we listen in a deep and compassionate way, because there are cries on all sides.

It helped me not just to speak of politics, but to remember art, poetry, other ways of seeing. William Carlos Williams said, "You can't get the news from poetry, but men and women die every day from lack of what is found there." Something deeper.

Here's a poem for you when we speak of respect:

Remember how astonished your daughter is at ladybugs and motorcycles, a pebble she finds, a moth, a firefly, the stars that follow the moon, mayflies, light seen from the window before bed. Remember beneath each scarf, bandana, and surgical mask, there is a throat that might break into sudden surprising aria. Remember the image of your lover's brown hair on the pillow in the blue hour of the morning, any morning, is worth more than all your poems and thoughts. Remember even an angry word from them is worth more than the best line of poetry you've ever read. Remember your poems cannot shelter you or make a roof for the ones you love. Remember the earth's sole vocation is to astonish.

Remember. The earth's sole vocation is to astonish.

We've been through so many things. Ups and downs, amazing and beautiful and magnificent and terrible and painful, connected and divisive. This is part of our birth here on earth—to quiet the mind and tend your own heart, to hear the cries and the fears, and to see with the eyes of wisdom the reality, the laws of incarnation, to live wisely. These are what I offer as core teachings.

I know if I were to go to Ajahn Chah right now, if he were still alive, and say, "There are many people who are really distraught about what has happened in this election"—not everyone, some of you may be celebrating, and I honor that too—he would look back and say, "Anicca. Things change." And smile as if to say, can you honor that? Change happens. It's the law. Anicca. And then he might tilt his head and say, "Oh, and dukkha too," the second of the characteristics—suffering, uncertainty. He'd nod. This is dukkha too. Can you see it? It's how it is. Is your heart big enough to hold it?

Now, if I were to ask the Dalai Lama, he would probably look with watery eyes of compassion and say, "This is hard to hold. I know it is." Hand on his heart. "Me too," he would say. And then he would laugh and say, "We learned to do this, you know."

Anicca, the wisdom of uncertainty. Things change. Nations change, societies change, politics change. We change, we age, we get sick, we die. The Buddha said, did you think this would not happen to you, to the people you care about? All these things come and go, and right now we are at a big turning point on the earth—what Joanna Macy calls the great turning. Can we shift from an exploitative consumer consciousness on this planet to one of interdependence and mutual care? Because for wellbeing, we may need to do this. We do need to do this.

And then you might say, well, that's a big order. I don't know if human beings can do it. I don't know it either. But it's not about an election one way or the other. They come and go. There are such huge other forces happening right now.

Climate change. Artificial intelligence. Enormous changes coming. Nuclear fusion energy that could proliferate and offer complete free energy everywhere if it's done right. Huge possibilities and huge problems.

And as T.S. Eliot says, "In my end is my beginning." Everything that turns then offers a new openness and beginning for something else. There is a freedom when we accept that things change. They do change. We can take our seat and step outside of that small sense of time, the tyranny of our ideas, and feel the great movement of life.

I like this poem:

When you return, fallen leaves will climb back into trees. Shards of the shattered vase will rise and reassemble on the table. Plastic raincoats will refold into their flat envelopes. The egg, ball, and its transparent halo slide back into the thin calcium shell. Curses will pour back into mouths. Letters unwrite themselves, words siphoned up into the pen. My gray hair will darken and become the feathers of a black swan. Bullets will snap back into their chambers, the powder tamped tight in brass casings. Borders will disappear from maps. Rust revert to oxygen and time. The fire returned to the log, the log to the tree, the white food curled up in the unsplit seed. Bird song will fly into the larks' young lungs. Answers become questions again. When you return, sweaters will unravel and wool grow on the sheep. Rock will go home to mountain, gold to vein, wine crust into grapes, oil pressed into the olives, silk reeled into the spider's body, ink drained from the indigo tattoo, diamonds will be returned to coal, coal to ferns, rain to clouds, light to stars sucked back and back into one timeless point, the way it was before the world was born, that fresh, that whole, nothing broken, nothing torn apart.

So we take a seat in the freedom outside of time, open to the change, the dance of it all.

And of course there is also dukkha—the three marks. We know the obvious dukkha: continuing warfare and injustice and racism and suffering, aging, pain, death, loss. They are our companions. We live in a culture that rather prefers to hide from this. There was a page—so young, and so many pills—on the cover of the second section of the Wall Street Journal describing the tens of millions of antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and ADHD medications that our children take. This is how our society deals with stress. Or we hide, blame somebody else.

Dukkha is part of life. Did you not notice? And when we open to it, something happens. We realize it's not personal. As Longfellow wrote, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." It's us.

Impermanence, suffering, and dukkha. And what comes out of it, if we turn toward it, if we acknowledge that this is the way it is, is such tenderness and compassion.

Zen Master Issa's three poetic lines: *Dew evaporates and all this world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.*

Now listen one more time. Because these three lines were written on the death of his young daughter. And you'll hear what he really meant:

Dew evaporates and all this world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, and so fleeting.

This is what opens the heart—that we share this. We share dukkha and anicca.

Yes, I could speak of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. But these are the basic laws as well: impermanence, instability of things, endless change.

And our freedom comes when we understand that dukkha is not a mistake. You didn't make a mistake. Somebody didn't make a mistake, and therefore we have suffering in human life. I mean, we have much more than suffering—there is beauty and magnificent love and so forth. And there's dukkha. It's simply the reality of our life as well.

Now, sometimes these three marks, as they're called—anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unstable, unsatisfactory, can't be held, suffering; and the third one, anatta, or selflessness, the emptiness of it all—sometimes they're named differently. Thich Nhat Hanh replaces dukkha with nirvana. He wanted people to understand that not only is there the field of suffering when we are attached and identified, but there's an unshakable freedom, an unshattered freedom.

Here he writes:

This body is not me. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born. I have never died. Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars, manifestations of the wondrous true mind consciousness itself. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us love now, and then let us say goodbye, only to meet again soon. We meet each other in all the forms of life. This body is not me. I am life without boundaries.

These are profound, wild, and liberating teachings.

You live in illusion in the appearance of things, in the color of the chain. There is a reality, but you do not know this. And when you understand, you will see that you are nothing. From being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

This is the invitation to step beyond the small sense of self, the individual that we have to take care of and carry and pay our taxes and stop on the red lights, and so forth. But the sense of separation is also a fiction. We are interwoven in the breath of the earth and that truth—billions of organisms that live within our own body. Most of you is not you, you know. It's all the other microorganisms in your gut, in your eyes, in your fingernails, every other part of your body.

And we know that we're not separate. You know it especially when you're on the mountaintop looking down from some amazing hike, or listening to a piece of music that transports you beyond that small sense of self. You know it when you make love or take psychedelics or have some profound meditation or dance until you disappear. We all know it.

A beautiful passage from an Australian Aboriginal elder puts it this way:

I'll tell you about the story, the real story, where you feel. Listen carefully to this. You can hear me. I'm telling you because Earth, just like mother and father or brother. You, that tree, same thing. Your body, my body, I suppose I'm same as you, anyone. Tree, working when you're sleeping and dreaming. That star, he's working there. See? He's working.

I can see. Always at night, if you lie down and look carefully, you can see that star working. When you sleep, blood pumping through your body—watch closely. It goes pink, then white. You see it work? It works. In the night when you dream, lying there, that star is working for you. Trees and grass are working for you.

Wow. What an understanding. It's all working for you. It's all a part of you. There are a billion causes and conditions that allow you to exist today.

We don't need to talk about politics or nations. It is so extraordinary that existence is here at all. And you and I get to play our part in this great dance. We get to plant seeds. In the Bhagavad Gita, there is Arjuna who doesn't want to go out on the field of battle, and who finally realizes the great lesson: to do your best to plant seeds, to act well without attachment to the fruits of your actions. Because you don't get to decide the outcome. You get to reach out and touch and mend what you can with your hand.

I looked at our past election as a ritual. Politics is a little bit like ritual warfare. Only instead of the Democrats and Republicans and the Libertarians and the Greens all mounting their tanks or their cannons or their steeds with swords and going to Wash-

ington to see who gets to win and take over for a while, it's ritualized. But it's sort of the same thing. And I think it's astonishing that hundreds of millions of people could participate in it. Even though it is troubling and troublesome and has its really messy parts and is smelly in some ways, it kind of worked. It was this huge ritual that we did, and we didn't destroy each other yet in any way. Kind of extraordinary.

So you now get to take the role that was assigned to you by your karma, or central casting, or however you want to say it. You got put in a pretty weird role—you know that, right? And then you get to do something with it. This is the freedom. The freedom is that, like Arjuna, here you are and it's messy. You don't want to go on the field of battle. But it is your task, wherever you are. And then you bring your heart. You say, all right, then let me choose to do something beautiful.

Howard Zinn wrote: "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. But if we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act."

Oh wise ones that you are, remember there's a freedom just where you are to choose—in the midst of change inevitable and all the causes and conditions, you get to choose. You get to choose your spirit no matter what. What greater gift could there be?

Now remember that it's also helpful to acknowledge in changing times that there is refuge to be found—traditionally, refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Just take a pause for a minute. The Buddhist texts begin: Oh nobly born, remember who we really are. Remember the dignity and freedom that was born in you. Yes, we humans can and do get lost in separateness and tribalism and conflict, in the body of fear. But we can also see beings with unconditional love, and from a place of freedom—as Nelson Mandela did in that restaurant.

We can do this too.

The human race tends to remember the abuses to which it has been subjected rather than the endearments. What's left of kisses? Wounds, however, leave scars. That's Bertolt Brecht. We forget the kisses sometimes and remember the trauma and the wound, but there is so much more.

Refuge in the Buddha means to see beings with unconditional love, to understand somehow that we can turn toward this life as a bodhisattva—as a being who deliberately turns toward suffering and difficulty and says, "Oh, I've been called. Let me help

alleviate suffering. Let me help beings be free." Even if the sun should arise in the west, the bodhisattva has only one way. When there is something difficult, their heart opens, their eyes open, and they say, "Ah, this is the place for me to add something beautiful."

I can hear Krishna Das, my friend, chanting this song that was given to him or that he wrote from a Zen prayer from Roshi Bernie last month. I wish I could sing it to you in his style—I'd need a harmonium and a better voice. "Calling out to hungry hearts everywhere through endless time. You who wander, you who thirst, I offer you this bodhi mind. Calling out to hungry spirits everywhere through endless time. Calling out to hungry hearts, all the lost and the left behind. Gather round and share this meal. Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine. Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine."

And here is the freedom that you find. The freedom to step out of fear. Yes, dukkha—that's part of the game, as Nietzsche understood. But there is also freedom from fear. You turn toward the difficult and say, "Oh yes, the perfect place to care, to build compassion, to transform." You rely on your own true nature, the Buddha nature, the nobility of beings. You rely on the Dharma, the truth, the laws, the way things are.

Human suffering grows when there is more greed, more hatred, and more ignorance. We can see plenty of it in human society—individually, in our families, our communities, our societies. But there is an opposite. Instead of greed, we can cultivate generosity. Instead of hatred, we can cultivate love. Instead of ignorance, we can cultivate wisdom. There is suffering and its causes. The more greed and hate, the more we suffer. The more love and wisdom and clarity, the more freedom and well-being we find.

Helen Keller put it this way: although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. And this gives birth to compassion.

When we see with the eyes of the Dharma, we see the possibility of living in a different way. One of the Buddhist texts recites: "Others will be cruel; we shall not be cruel. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will steal and take what is not given; we shall be generous. Thus we shall incline the heart. Others will speak falsely and maliciously; we will tell the truth with kindness. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be envious; we will be appreciative. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be arrogant; we will have humility. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be unmindful and uncaring; we will be mindful and caring. Thus we will incline the heart. Others around will lack wisdom; we shall cultivate and live with wisdom and blessings. And thus we will incline the heart."

This is a recitation of the noble truths, the path of the Dharma. Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. And it is lawful. We can plant seeds of goodness, and eventually they will bear fruit.

Maybe not in our lifetime, but they will. And this is our freedom—to know what's true. Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. And this is the Dharma. You know this.

So we're being called to remember the deep and basic truths in the midst of all that's going on. And that is our freedom. Others may do certain things. We know who we are in heart and mind.

O nobly born, remember refuge in Buddha nature and fundamental dignity, liberation of heart. O nobly born, remember the Dharma, the possibility of awakening just where we are. Remember Sangha, community.

The monastic Buddhist communities are among the oldest living continuous communities of humans organized in that way. And it's an expression of our collective wisdom. You know it and I know it—when I've worked in nonprofits and corporations, an individual's understanding is always limited. And it's so helpful and wonderful to come together with other people and say, "How do you see it? Let me understand how it looks from your perspective. What do you have to offer?" And almost always, almost always, the result is better. We need one another in so many ways. And we care for one another. If there's an accident near you, someone falls in the street, the initial impulse is: How do I help? How can I make a difference? This is who we are. Community is born into us—or we're born into community is probably a better way to say it. You come out of your mother's womb and you're already in community. And you look around. Don't forget it in these times. Sangha, community, mutual care—so uplifting and so liberating.

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a Veterans Affairs hospital. The work was challenging in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I'm a lesbian. My growing discomfort with the question seemed only to egg them on. Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since they had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward where patients could become argumentative, angry, aggressive. I sometimes didn't feel safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a truly threatening manner. Just as I was starting to get worried, an equally large Vietnam vet with dementia quietly came between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere, and they stood nearby in silence. I felt safe. I'm retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

This is us. This is us, you know?

Chan Master Cheng Yen says, "Those who do not have faith in others will not be able to stand on their own. Those who are suspicious will always be lonely." What does it mean to have faith in others, to trust, to feel the Sangha? This is the freedom of the heart of community. The heart knows that you're supported by millions and billions and gazillions of beings—from the earthworms and the hummingbirds, the field mice and the trillion microorganisms growing in your intestines and around your body. And the

countless numbers of good deeds being done every day by billions of human beings for one another, to help each other. So many ways—caring for family, for community. That's the web that we don't see in the newspapers, in the media.

But there's something even greater, if you will, or as great, when you look for your freedom, freedom of heart. And that is to understand that you have backup. Your backup is Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Archbishop Tutu and Wangari Maathai and Thomas Jefferson on his good days and Marie Curie and all the sages and saints of thousands of years. They're your backup. They're part of you. And the trees, as that beautiful aboriginal vision says—they're working for you. And the creatures, working for you.

This is the great freedom: that you're not alone. You're supported and loved and part of this, no matter what. And yes, there's impermanence and there's dukkha. Just how it is—incarnation, birth and death, gain and loss, praise and blame, joy and sorrow. We all have this. And there's something bigger. Who we really are. The mystery of consciousness itself, born into this body and incarnation. And the invitation is to the great heart of compassion and understanding. You are free. And you're free to do beautiful things with your life.

After a period of silence, a woman named Susie spoke from the gathering, her voice carrying both tenderness and weight.

"I bring my family," she said. "Here is my daughter, my daughter who has cried since the election. My daughter who I always say is the Buddha—she's the wise daughter, filled with wisdom, and she cannot..." Susie paused. "And I say to her, it's just life. It's just what is. And I hold her in my heart and make jokes with her. But I say, go ahead and cry all you need to. And this is somebody who is a wise mind. She lives from a wise mind."

Susie continued, "I just volunteered for the ACLU as soon as I heard the results. I always donate, but I figured I'll give my time. Make phone calls. But I don't know what to say."

"Can you say what your daughter's first name is?" I asked.

"Sarah."

"So first of all, thank you for bringing her and you in together. Because there are people that are weeping."

She's younger, you know, and sensitive. She's not like my mom who said, "Oh, Jackie" – she called me that when I was little – she said, "My father came back from World War I, and then we lived through the Great Depression and World War II and the Cold War, and you hiding under your desk from the nuclear bombs, and the assassinations." She said, "We've been through this." But she hasn't. And even if she had, she may still be carrying the tears of many, many people.

And so your willingness to hold her is exactly right – to honor her sensitivity along with her wisdom. It's kind of a beautiful pair: wisdom and a sensitive heart. I want to thank her for her tears. We need more tears, actually. We need people who are our leaders to also be able to cry sometimes, because that's what's true. And she's not holding that back. Good for her.

You're lucky to have each other. Thank you, Susie. Take care, dear.

Ben, great to be here with you.

"I feel excited to be able to speak with you. I've been sitting with your teachings for a while now. This year I had a good dose of dukkha, some pains that cut pretty deep, and I turned pretty hard back into meditation. I've been studying a lot and sitting a lot, read a bunch of your books – or at least listened to them on audio. So I've spent many hours

with your voice in my ear. I did a short retreat in September, and I'm doing one at the end of this week at Spirit Rock for seven days, which I'm very excited about. Your talks and teachings are always extremely helpful.

One of the places in my own practice where I'm struggling is that I get locked into some justified anger. Your talk today was so much about these broad perspectives and being with others in a profoundly compassionate way. But I find I can get stuck on these small loops where I'm frustrated with pain that others have caused me or caused people close to me. I think in *A Path with Heart* you talk about your 'top ten playlist' – this is my top ten playlist. I'm becoming quite familiar with it. I'm curious if you have suggestions on practices I might bring into my daily practice, as well as the retreat that's coming up."

First, I really appreciate that you have been practicing. You said you got a big dose of dukkha. Can you say in a word or a few what that was?

"It's all a tad tender, but yes – some big personal losses, and an awakening to some sufferings that were going on around me amongst people I'm close to. Big transitions. I also run several companies, and it's a lot of work and very exhausting. Until this year, I hadn't been doing the work I needed with the meditation on a daily basis to really bring the equanimity I needed. So several things piled together."

Thank you for sharing that.

Because people are listening and I haven't realized—okay, you're in the middle of it. And there's all these things that go on. And if you're in a bit of a leadership position too, or whatever you have, then you have even more of it. People looking in, you have to carry some wisdom and compassion in the middle of it. And then people are behaving badly around people. They do that. They cause pain.

So where do you carry that justified anger and the pain from it? Where do you carry it in your body? If you close your eyes and sense that anger, where is it?

"I feel a fair amount in my throat and in my chest."

Yeah, so feel it. What's it feel like? Is it hot? Vibrating?

"Yeah, it is. It's also mixed with nervousness in the moment here."

Sure. So let yourself feel that—the nervousness and heat in the throat. The throat often carries things that would come out: the shouts, the pain, whatever, all that. And then notice, as you feel it, because you make space with mindful awareness, what happens if you don't try to get rid of it or do something about it, but you just feel it and hold

it with a kind attention? Say, "Ah yes, this is pain. This is painful." And this is anger that comes up, and the mind justifies the stories. You watch the mind do its stories, and you feel the pain or the anger or the heat of it. And you just bring a compassion to say, "Yeah, this is part of what we have to live with." What happens when you do it? Does it get more intense?

"Yeah, so I practice a lot and this comes up a fair amount. I think we're at... I go to planning and I go to arguing with people in my head. And I replay scenarios. I replay injuries and I replay what I would say or what I should have said, or how I can protect myself in the future, protect people around me in the future."

Okay, close your eyes again. Here's what happened. You felt the pain—it's hot. You felt the anger. And then quite accurately, you'll notice that your mind does all this stuff to not just feel that, feel the pain of it. You want to fix it, argue, make it better, something.

How about if you just let yourself hold the pain? Because it hurts and it's unfair, and so you feel that tearing because of the injustice of it. You feel the heat of anger and the unfairness, the pain underneath, and how much you care. Tune in, because all this suffering is also because you care so much. Right? And you're not trying to fix it. And you can see your mind arguing—thank you, okay, I've done that, thank you. And you're just being kind and saying, "This is part of what my life is—to also be able to hold this with compassion."

And notice what happens with your eyes closed. What happens to it? Does it get bigger? What does it do when you hold it this way?

"Yeah, it calms down a lot. It relaxes."

Yeah.

"I think there's a lot of feelings behind it, which is something you mentioned in a heart with neuropathy."

Yeah, yeah. And they could be there too. So it relaxes and calms.

You can feel that other emotions want to come. Now you become—and it's beautiful to watch you—more in your body and more present. You're not trying to fix it or bargain it away or argue it or something. You're just being with it in a compassionate and steady way. And through this, it will begin to teach you how to be present for the other emotions. You more and more trust that you can do this. And then you will be less re-

active. It's not going to scare you or overtake you or feel like so much. Then you can take whatever actions you need to take, but they won't come from anger or fear—they'll come because you care.

"In these last eight months, I've been really practicing, and my capacity to be with feelings has increased tremendously. But this is one of those places where I'm really knotted up. I think what I'm really taking away is to be very attentive and aware of when I go from the feeling to the planning or the rational or the judging."

Right. And don't judge it—that's what the mind does. But that's not the place to live. The place to live is in a compassionate heart that holds the feelings.

This is beautiful, because as you were doing this work yourself, you were teaching everybody else. We are all grateful to you.

"I heard and appreciated very much your comments this evening for myself and for my heart in general, but I come to you tonight as a mother, as a parent—the mother of a permanently head-injured child. He lives because his accident happened when he was beyond our ability to keep him on our insurance. He is, in essence, a ward of the state of New York, living on Social Security, disability, and Medicaid. The incoming regime has promised to slash and destroy and take away benefits. I fear for my son's life. I don't know how to hold that sadness. I don't want to fix it. But I don't know how to hold the pain of seeing someone take and destroy so many people's lives. I realize that's in the future and we need to be present, yet I see this person promising to do these things. I'm trying to hold that in my heart and keep my heart open. What would you suggest?"

First of all, what you're saying is also a concern of many folks. There may be people who hold another view, who feel good things will come out of this next administration. People have all these different perspectives. But when I think about your son, it's so tender and so real as a mother. And then I think about the people I know who are immigrants here but undocumented, and I realize someone could knock on their door, haul them out, push them across the border to a place where they never even lived. There are a lot of very frightened people because of the kinds of things that have been said.

So you're not just giving your mother's voice for your son. You're also giving the voice of the mothers—because there are so many people who could be at risk. We don't know.

I don't have a simple response. I kind of just want to sit with what you've said for a moment.

As a father and a parent, holding the suffering of our children is one of the most difficult things we're ever given to do. It just is. It's almost like you want to say, "I'll take on the suffering myself and you'll be free," but you can't. And so you're bearing it, and you have to. So first, just to acknowledge—this is so hard.

Now, second, let yourself, let your heart and your consciousness expand to sense all the other mothers whose children are at risk—not just from the current politics, but maybe it's the children of mothers who are in Gaza. And Sudan. And all of a sudden, let yourself feel as if you could hold hands with these mothers, because you are the mothers that are holding the world together. And you're holding it with torn hearts. You're really holding this. And you need to support each other, which you do.

Feel this. This is one of the most difficult things you'll be asked to do in your life. And one of the most important. Can I carry this in love and care and not be taken over by despair and hopelessness, but still somehow do what I can? And it's you, and it's all the mothers that carry this together. The mothers have been doing this for a long time. Mothers are extraordinary. And it's really hard, which is why we need each other. You need each other in community.

Hold hands. Feel the sense of support. And love. And a kind of courage. I see you have a lot of strength. I see you have a lot of courage. And I see you have a really profound love. Don't let the outer things take over your heart, because it's such a good heart. You are strong. I see it. Strong and loving.

I'm glad to connect. We've been friends for a very long time. So I hold you in the same way, with that kindness and a lot of respect. A lot of respect.

And when I look now and I see the screen, the eyes and the faces are so beautiful. And same respect. We carry a lot. You know, you're asked to carry a lot—personally, sometimes really difficult. And then with your eyes and your heart open, we carry a lot collectively.

Take a look across the screen at the faces, if you will. You can sort of scroll a little, because these people are with you. Look in their eyes as if to ask, can we do this together? Can we hold this world together in a beautiful way, in the face of difficulty, personal and collective?

And feel the courage behind these eyes. We can do this. Feel the compassion behind these eyes, because it's here.

It really is.

I'm grateful. Thank you. Linda, thank you. And thank you to everybody who's tuned in.

We are holding hands. We're touching hearts. And there's this great love that grows in the midst of it all, that blooms even in the suffering.

This is also true.

CHAPTER 52

A Rudder in Turbulent Times

Jack Kornfield · 1h40

> *In this heartfelt Monday night teaching, Jack Kornfield addresses how to navigate periods of cultural anxiety and rapid change through the lens of Buddhist wisdom. Opening with a guided mettā (loving-kindness) meditation and a reading from the Metta Sutta, he establishes the foundation of practice that has protected practitioners for millennia.*
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> *Drawing from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta's teachings on wise society—where communities prosper through harmony, care for the vulnerable, respect for nature, and honoring ancestral wisdom—Kornfield offers practical guidance for turbulent times. He references the Sālekhā Sutta's instructions on maintaining integrity: "Others will be cruel, we shall be kind. Others will speak falsely, we shall speak truth." The teaching weaves together stories of moral courage, from Nelson Mandela's reconciliation with his former prison guard to a military officer who defused a volatile crowd through a gesture of respect.*
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> *Kornfield encourages listeners to ground themselves like great trees with deep roots, to steady the heart through practice, and to remember that we are all survivors whose ancestors brought us through countless upheavals. He invokes the Bodhisattva path—entering difficult realms deliberately to bring benefit—reminding us that now is the time to draw on our moral strength, creativity, and courage. The talk concludes with community sharing that demonstrates the teaching in action: neighbors supporting immigrants, people standing in solidarity, and practitioners honestly acknowledging their struggles while returning to their good hearts.*

This Monday Night Sitting group was started forty years ago in a friend's living room in San Anselmo, and then moved to the Fairfax Community Church for about thirty years, every week, more than thirty years. Recently I've been doing it once a month, with others filling in. And I'm still really grateful to have you attend, to be connected. I see you in your little squares, at least some of you, many of you who I know. And it feels like a really important time to have community and to be together.

What we do on Monday night is really very simple. We have a meditation period, twenty or thirty minutes or more, then take a break for five or ten minutes to stretch or relax. And then usually, as there will be tonight, some teachings and some time for questions and dialogue afterward.

It is both a pleasure to see you, and at the same time, I'm also missing the live Monday nights and how sweet and connecting it is to sit in the community hall at Spirit Rock and be present with one another. And maybe that will happen, but not for right now.

In these rather turbulent times, the theme for this evening is a rudder—a rudder for crossing the wild stream, for navigating the times. I was reflecting on what would be a good practice for us this evening, and so I'd like to guide, for those who wish, a loving kindness or metta practice.

How many of you already do sometimes a metta practice? Basically all the hands go up, because it's part of the tradition and one of the practices that has spread most widely, along with mindfulness, here in the West.

What's true about metta practice is there are a variety of different ways to do it. One of the ways you may have practiced is closing your eyes and systematically reciting certain phrases, picturing yourself or people you care about: May you be safe, may you be well, may you be happy, may you be peaceful—things like that.

Another way of practicing metta that's also ancient and traditional is to invoke or invite the feeling of love to be in yourself without the specific words or images—more that you become a carrier of, or a beacon of, kindness. Whatever arises—thoughts, people, images, concerns—the response might be held in kindness. This too, held in kindness, about yourself, others, the world around you.

And of course, the ideal as you practice is to find your own way, to find what most naturally resonates with yourself as a gateway to open the heart. To feel not just the loving connection with the world, but more deeply, to feel the state. And that, in the deepest way, is who and why.

So with this very small introduction, let yourself find a way to sit comfortably and at ease. In doing metta and loving kindness practice, it's really helpful to sit in a way without a lot of pain. It's very hard to do loving kindness when your knees are killing you. Let your body actually have a sense of care and wellbeing, and rest in that sense of wellbeing.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently, and first bring kind attention to your own body. Take a couple of long breaths. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle to release your neck. Let it have a simple, upright ease. Let the shoulders relax, the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body and let yourself sink down or settle into your seat, so you feel completely supported by the seat and the earth below. You can rest just where you are. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Only in the space of presence and stillness.

Let me read to you the one-page version of the Metta Sutta, loving kindness, that has been recited for thousands of years. As you listen, let the words invite an opening of the heart and mind and body to the field of love and the field of kindness.

This is the work of those who are skilled and peaceful, who seek the good.

May they be able and upright, straightforward, and easily supported, unburdened with their senses calmed. May they be wise, not arrogant, without desire for the possessions of others. May they do nothing mean or that which the wise would reprove.

And resting in this simple goodness, let them reflect and share in this way: May all beings be happy. May all beings live in safety and joy. All living beings—and this is your well-wishing going out to beings in trouble, beings in every form. May all living beings, whether weak or strong, tall or stout, average or short, seen or unseen, beings near and those distant—may beings everywhere be happy. May they have wellbeing in every form.

Let no one deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none by anger or hatred wish harm to another. But as a mother watches over her child, willing to risk her own life to protect her only child, so with a boundless heart one should cherish all living beings as your children, suffusing the whole world with unobstructed loving kindness. Above and below, around every quarter, pervaded with loving thought and care. Sublime—standing or walking, sitting or lying down—during all the waking hours, may one remain mindful of this heart of kindness. This way of living is the best in this world. And may your loving kindness, with love-filled thought abounding beyond measure, reach beings in every dimension and every direction.

Every time you recite these words or hear them, know that in other parts of the world just now, there are people reciting these same words and evoking the same spirit of metta. Always—twenty-four hours a day, every hour and minute—someone is reciting and practicing loving kindness. And you can feel it. You join in the stream of kindness. You can rest in the field of loving kindness.

Or if you like, you can add the words of loving kindness in the systematic way that many have done, and picture loved ones and friends and neutral ones and beings in every quarter, each time wishing: may they be safe and protected, happy and well, filled with kindness. Or you can rest in the reality of the present, and whatever arises, whisper from the heart: held in kindness, held in kindness. The thoughts, the feelings, the people, the memories, the sensations—held in kindness. Whatever floats your love boat, follow that. And if the attention wanders, as it will, when you remember, just the simple phrase: held in kindness. Wherever it went—held in kindness. Staying in the loving heart. Held in kindness.

If you wish, you can direct the field of loving kindness to parts of the world, spreading loving kindness especially to those who are suffering, struggling. And to those who are causing suffering—may their hearts too become peaceful and loving. Omitting none, it says. Omitting none. And to beings in every shape and form, beings of the waters, beings of the earth—well-wishing to be held in kindness.

And finally, bring the loving kindness back strongly to yourself. If you'd like, you can even put a hand or two on your heart, on your belly, and hold this mysterious life you've been given with loving kindness. With care. And feel yourself as a field of metta, loving kindness. When you're ready, gently open your eyes. You carry the light of this loving kindness in your being for all you see and touch.

Welcome back from the break. Let yourself get settled again in some way where you can listen as a kind of meditation and reflection. Not so much that you have to believe what I say or talk about—it's a contemplation. A reminder, perhaps. If there's something that touches you as true, let that inspire you. And if there's something that feels wrong or awful, let it go.

So to begin with, on this Monday in February 2025, I recently returned from a pilgrimage in Southeast Asia—Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. It was quite wonderful. I got back the day after the Los Angeles fires started, returning to LA with Trudy. And it was, of course, very difficult. We now have many friends who have lost their houses, homes, and livelihood. The fires were very close to our houses. Trudy's daughter lived just a block and a half away from the edge of the Palisades fire, where everything else had burned—other dear friends too. So that was really difficult to come back to.

It seems like our life goes along, we know what's going to happen, we have our plans. And then—in the Buddhist texts, there's a phrase that karma can change as quickly as the swish of a horse's tail. Part of the nature of samsara, this world of birth and death, is the nature of uncertainty. Everybody had their certainties about their life. And then for thousands, it was an enormous upheaval.

Then we went from Los Angeles to lead a retreat in Costa Rica. I love being in Costa Rica and teaching there because the greeting and the culture uses the word *pura vida*. It's a kind of hello greeting, like aloha—*pura vida*, pure life. There's such a warm and friendly culture. It's probably the only country of its size that has no army. It's also a warm and caring culture because it was never heavily colonized. They were fortunate—they didn't have gold or oil. So in other ways, they were left more alone.

It was a reminder of the Buddhist teachings of wise society. That if we live with care for one another, without an army but with mutual care, things can be quite beautiful.

But now I'm back, as we are in the US, in a kind of maelstrom of change and cultural anxiety—at least for many.

I want to read a poem that was sent to me by my friend and fine poet Alison Luterman this last week. Because when I read it, I wept at the end. It describes some of the kinds of changes that are happening or being proposed. And if we think about how we navigate these wild waters, how we have a rudder—the first part is just to wake up to what's happening.

It's called "Praise the Broken Promise of America":

Praise deep mineral veins under the rich dirt and fossilized remains of dinosaurs turning themselves into gas for our benefit. Praise the exhausted earth, miles and miles of subsidized corn, and cattle lowing from their hell holes in automated milking barns.

This is not an easy poem.

Praise farm workers rising before dawn, their sore backs and aching knees. Praise the myth that drew them here, stories eagerly consumed when there is nothing to eat but faith. Praise the courage of the reverend to look the dragon in the eye and preach mercy. Praise whatever hidden waterways are still pristine.

Praise music that refused to play at the funeral of democracy and the killing cold that swept through Washington when a fake pope took power. Praise drag queens and lipstick lesbians, boys who were girls and girls who were lions, butch women wearing tool belts, and all the music theater nerds who are even now building new passageways, mapping the next underground railroad, and suiting up to be conductors.

Oh, everybody, get on board. This train will chug quietly across the Great Plains and over rocky Sierras into the desert where people still leave bottles of water and packets of food for the desperate who have always been the lifeblood of this nation. It will stop in obscure hamlets to pick up fugitives with tears tattooed on their cheeks and fraying backpacks overspilling with contraband books.

Praise the weirdos because if anyone can save us, it will be us.

And praise all the glittering illusions we gawked at, ignoring our own neighbors in favor of a 24-hour peep show on the internet. Praise the conflict firefighters on the front lines in LA battling the insurmountable for ten dollars a day. We gambled our future for a hot air balloon with a hole in it. Praise our reckless hubris and the infinite distractions of the hall of mirrors we find ourselves in now.

And bless our overwhelmed brains scurrying like mice for shelter. Bless our collective rage and protect the officers who stood up on January 6th and now see their attackers roaming the streets like rabid dogs.

Oh, bless the animals we have always been in our coats and shoes and clumsy language. Bless our willful ignorance, so enormous, so world-altering, that like the Great Wall of China, it can be seen from outer space, where the gods are shaking their heads even now, in pity and in awe.

Now, mind you, I'm aware that poem comes from a person with a liberal persuasion. But it's also heartbreaking.

And it doesn't mean that there isn't value, which I see in conservative points of view—in simplifying government overreach or other things that we can do to simplify and straighten our society. Because the benefits of the Dharma are useful and universal, and it doesn't choose which party to support.

But I also see that the rapid pace of change brings an enormous potential of suffering falling upon the vulnerable, which is what the poem points to. I have a call from a friend who works at WHO, and another who's been one of the main leaders in USAID, saying, "You don't understand. For less than half a percent of your American budget,

you saved millions of lives—starving children, HIV transmission stopped, polio you're ending. So many things you've done as the richest nation in the world. We still look to you."

So how to navigate? And this is, if you will, a hard talk and a serious one. How do we respond? What is the rudder, if you will—what teachings, whatever your political persuasion, might be kept in mind?

First, remember your best values as things change. I was in a meeting with several of the heads of the biggest AI companies in the world and a world-famous historian who looked at them and said, "You know, you're like the Bolsheviks." And they sat back. He said, "Yeah, you look at what happened in Russia. They tried to change the whole society very quickly. How did that work out? Look at how the Maoists did it. 'Oh, we're going to have AI and we're going to get new jobs.' Look at how it worked out in China. How about Cambodia? You all have to stop for a moment and reflect."

It was kind of an amazing moment because they were taken aback being called Bolsheviks when they thought they were capitalists. But it's where we are.

So for you and me and those around, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta begins: If a society meets in harmony and treats one another with respect, it will prosper and not decline, says the Buddha. If a society takes care of the vulnerable among them—the children, the women, those who are vulnerable—it can be expected to prosper and not decline. If the society reveres the wise teachings of past generations, it can be expected to prosper, not decline. If society cares for the natural world around it, it can be expected to prosper and not decline.

So these are the values of wise society taught by the Buddha: respect, care for the vulnerable, care for nature. Remember your best values.

Then in this time, ground yourself and steady your heart. Do you remember Thich Nhat Hanh's line about when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates? If everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained steady and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

I'm going to do a whole teaching another night on anxiety, but we're swimming in it—a cultural anxiety. And so to steady yourself, do your meditation. And breathe. Imagine as you sit that you're a great tree with roots that go down into the earth. Breathing in air. Buffeted by storms and winds and change of seasons. But underneath, let your core be steady.

When anxiety arises, acknowledge it. Name it. "Anxiety is like this. It feels like this in the body." Acknowledge the stories that it tells. Say thank you. "Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay in this moment. You can stand down. You can rest."

Maybe change the story. You'll hear the story anxiety tells. Change that story to one of challenge. Wade Davis, the great explorer, said, "Despair is a failure of imagination." Change the story to one of imagination and possibility, to one of challenge. Shift your chakras—go from the fear place to the heart, to the place of love that we just did. Walk out in nature.

All these things to ground yourself. Steady yourself. Because we human beings have been through huge upheavals many, many times, and we know how to do this. Remember your best values. Ground and steady yourself. Don't be afraid.

This is what H. L. Mencken, the great political commentator of a hundred years ago, said: "The whole aim of politics is to keep the populace alarmed and hence clamorous to be led to safety." And so the zeitgeist and the media are almost designed to activate fight, flight, or freeze, to colonize the nervous system and make you afraid and worried. Don't buy it. It's not who you are. It's not what we are as human beings.

When the terrified monks and perhaps nuns who were practicing out in the forest around the Buddha came running after a night of wild animals and howls, they asked, "What should we do? Please give us a protection—we're so alarmed." And he said, "I will give you the protection." That was the first time the Buddha formally taught metta and loving-kindness as a practice. He said, "Develop this and embody this metta, and you will be protected wherever you go." In the name of ancestors who have practiced through hard times, up and down and around, with a loving and compassionate heart.

Here's a puzzle for you. Belief means just this: who is right and who is wrong. The sutras say the wise do not cling to views—not "who," but rather take your stand on principles, on what is to be valued. Support what's good on every side.

I loved reading Rahm Emanuel, who had been Obama's chief of staff and mayor of Chicago and many other things as a kind of stalwart, famous liberal, writing in the New York Times or the Washington Post about how he was cheering for Donald Trump to get the Nobel Prize. He said this man has the opportunity to revision what's happening with Iran or in the Middle East or Ukraine or North Korea. He said he deserves a Nobel Prize. Rahm Emanuel said, "I'm cheering him on. May he solve one or more of those and bring peace in the Middle East and Ukraine and with North Korea." Support what's good wherever you see it. Take the long view—I'll talk about that in a moment. Live with integrity and the virtue of non-harming.

So this is the Sallekha Sutta. When asked how we live in a society where there are difficulties, this is the practice: "Others will be cruel; we shall be kind—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will speak falsely; we shall speak truth—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will exploit and steal; we shall be honest and generous—thus we shall incline the heart." What it is really asking and saying and inviting us to do is to live with integrity and virtue, more than ever in this time.

After becoming president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela recounted: "I asked some of my bodyguard members to go for a walk in town. After the walk, we went to lunch at a restaurant. The waiters asked what we wanted, and I noticed at a table nearby a man sitting alone, waiting to be served. When he was served, I told one of my guards to ask that man to join us. The man stood up, took his plate, and sat next to me. While eating, his hands were constantly shaking, and he didn't lift his head from the food. When we finished, he waved without even looking at me and walked away. One of my guards said, 'Madiba, that man must be very sick. His hands wouldn't stop trembling.' 'Not at all,' I said. 'The reason for his tremor is another.' They looked at me and I went on: 'That man was the guard of the jail where I was locked up.'"

Often after the torture I was subjected to, I screamed and cried for water. He came to humiliate me. He laughed at me. And instead of giving me water, he urinated on my head. He wasn't sick. He was scared and trembling, perhaps fearing that I, now the president of South Africa, would send him to jail and do the same thing he did to me—torturing and humiliating him. But that's not me. That behavior is not part of my character, nor my ethics. Minds that seek revenge destroy nations, while those that seek reconciliation build wise societies.

Live with integrity and the virtue of non-harming. Others will be cruel; we shall be kind. Others will speak falsely; we shall speak truth.

And from the teachings: Do not be afraid to stand up and speak for these values. From the text again: "Truthfully will I speak, with good intention will I speak, for the benefit of all will I speak." Don't remain silent.

A couple named Carrie and Laurie Riding came home to find their rainbow flag on their front porch had been stolen and their house egged. Anti-homosexual vandalism wasn't what they expected in their close-knit Massachusetts neighborhood. As it turned out, it also wasn't what their neighbors expected. They got together and said, "Why don't we all have flags? They can't take them from all of us." As one of the neighbors explained to the Boston Globe, within days, the rainbow flag—the symbol of gay pride—

was flying in solidarity with the Ridings on over forty other homes in this family-friendly area. One person's act of fear and maliciousness created a powerful statement of love, said Laurie. Love wins.

Do not be afraid to stand up and speak for your values.

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember the fundamental dignity and nobility of every single being, and treat them that way—with respect.

Another story for you. In the early years of the Iraq War, this is a story from the New Yorker, a small unit of American soldiers were assigned to go to the holy city of Najaf. It was a delicate mission, as the presence of Americans in uniform was seen as a potential desecration of their faith and sacred sites. When the soldiers approached one of the revered mosques, hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on each side, fists waving, throats taut. They pressed in on the fifteen Americans, who glanced at each other in terror. The reporter witnessing it said he felt afraid that a shot would come from somewhere, or someone would open fire, and it would turn into a massacre.

And then, quite suddenly, in the middle of it all, the American officer in charge stopped and held his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground. He stood there against the backdrop of the seething crowd, now almost a thousand deep. It was a striking gesture, almost biblical. And then he took a knee. The officer held his position and told his men to follow. The soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy. And then, one by one, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the crowd and pointed their guns at the ground in the same position as their officer. The Iraqis fell silent. Their anger subsided, and the officer ordered his men to withdraw.

The writer of the story said it took him months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Hughes. How did you learn to tame a crowd in a war zone in a distant country? Hughes offered a shrug. It's not part of army training. The problem, you know—people start shooting for real, said Colonel Hughes. The Iraqis felt that the armed Americans had disrespected their mosque and their culture in this holy city. The obvious solution was a gesture. And this is what makes wise society: to offer the gesture of respect to everyone—those you agree with and those you disagree with.

And take the long view. As I said before, here's Gandhi saying: "When I despair, I remember that all throughout history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Think of it. Always."

How long?

As long as it takes.

In the great cycles of existence, there's a wisdom that we know and carry. Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

And we human beings—we've been through wars and depression, and we will again go through global crisis. We may be in the middle of one now. To be hopeful in bad times, writes Howard Zinn, is not just foolishly romantic. It's based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something good. But if we remember the times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and the possibility of sending the spinning top of a world in a fine direction.

Take the long view, because it's your intention and your heart and mind, in all the cycles of birth and death—it is that deep intention of wisdom that creates what's possible.

The word Vipassana means to see clearly. Look with clear eyes. Believe in your own observations, your honest wisdom. Believe in science when it's good science. Believe in art. As it says in the Kalama Sutta, do not follow what others say. See for yourself: this is harmful, and this is of benefit. Have the clarity and courage to not avert your gaze. Yes, times can be difficult. Did it never occur to you, it says in the text, that suffering will come to you as well? We're in this together, this human realm, subject to joy and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame.

With all of these things, you become what's called a make-weight. In the old days, when you went to the market, they'd hold up one of those scales and put the papaya or the rice or whatever it was in one pan. In the other, they'd put metal weights until they balanced. The make-weights are the name for the tiny little weights added after they put in the one pound or two kilo weight. Often they're quite beautiful, created in the form of a series of little animals—little ducks or little whatever they are. And they get added until that last make-weight tips the scale, makes it go down.

It doesn't take a lot at some times for us to add our goodness—to serve, to care, to support, to awaken. You can be that make-weight that tips the scale.

Join with others. Taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in the Dharma, we take refuge in the Sangha, the third of the refuges. Especially in difficult times, I can't tell you how important community is, because we can easily get isolated. And there are a thousand ways to find others—to create affinity groups, to join service organizations in your

neighborhood and around you, to stand up, whether you're political or social, whether you join with artists. Reach out and say, let's do this together. Let's support one another. There are a thousand small ways to do it.

And now is the time.

Twelve-year-old Matthew Flores of Sandy, Utah approached the mailman, his postal worker Ron Lynch, and asked if he had any extra advertisements or random newsletters. Matthew explained that he loved to read, but he couldn't afford books. Even the bus fare to the library was too much most of the time. So he'd take anything the mailman had that was extra. Ron Lynch was floored. He didn't want electronics. He didn't want to sit in front of the TV playing games all day. The kid just wanted to read. Lynch told the local newspaper and asked his Facebook friends for reading material.

Soon, Flores was getting books sent from all over the world—the US, England, India, South America. For his part, Flores said he plans to read all the books and then share them with other book-starved kids.

It's simple. And that's maybe the last teaching for how to live like a Bodhisattva.

Now is your time. We're all survivors, you know, and your ancestors brought you here—they survived. We know how to do this. You've been training for this for a long time in your life: how to stay steady, how to keep your values with integrity, how to care for one another.

The Bodhisattva enters the realms of the hungry ghosts, the jealous gods. They happen to live in Washington DC these days. The Bodhisattva lovingly enters all realms, deliberately, to bring support and loving-kindness, compassion, to help alleviate suffering. Dear Bodhisattva, I vow to bring benefit—or however you want to say it. What better thing could you do in life?

Now is the time to draw on your moral strength, your courage, your creativity. It's almost like the world has orchestrated this because the globe needs a reset. We know this with climate change and warfare and racism and AI and all these things happening. We need a new set of values to really come forth. You know this as well as I. And it happens when we get quiet and remember what our deepest values are. Then amazing things can happen.

I was just reading about José Andrés, the world-celebrated chef of El Bulli who started World Central Kitchen after the hurricane in Puerto Rico. He got volunteers, and thousands of people came and served tens of thousands of meals. Now World Central

Kitchen has served a hundred million meals in Ukraine and Sudan and places where people are hungry. That's a kind of grand thing—kind of fun to talk about and inspiring. He's got people who know how to cook from all over the world with him.

But it doesn't have to be that big. It's the kid who said, "Do you have any books or anything I can read?"

The Bodhisattva's reflection: How can I live and contribute to a wise and healthy and compassionate society? How can I be part of us meeting in harmony and respect? How can I support protecting the vulnerable and the natural world around us and respecting the wisdom of generations before?

And for me, it's the same. I'm listening. I don't even know what to do. I was touched by the image of the Underground Railroad. I live in a neighborhood full of immigrants, some documented and some not. And I will talk to them. How can I help? What do their families need? I talk to CEOs also. But you can lobby, educate, create art, sing songs, serve in the community.

Underneath, you get quiet. And you remember that you're here for a beautiful purpose, O Bodhisattvas. What better thing to do with your life?

So let's pause for a moment. Just be quiet. It's a confusing time in some ways, and also a time that calls for us to speak out or to make a difference.

I want to ask if anyone—there are a lot of you on the screen—just for the fun of it, who might be willing to be a conductor on the Underground Railroad, if it's called for. Just to see if any hands go up.

Yeah. There are.

It's not right for everyone. But it might be right for some of you.

Let's open the community space for comments, questions, and dialogue for a little bit before we end the evening.

Nancy shared something beautiful. "You know, it's so interesting because today I live in Los Angeles, and today I went to Homeboy Industries. I'm sure you know Father Boyle."

Yes, I do.

"Well, he has just written a book called *Cherished Belonging and the Healing Power of Love in Divided Times*. I just got it today—I'm only on page twenty-seven. But he is so heartfelt about seeing the goodness in everybody. One of the things I love so much that

he says is, instead of focusing on punishment—you know, he works mainly with gang guys who've been in prison—what he encourages us to do is see the pain instead of the behavior. I feel like that could be very helpful. I don't know how to work with it when you see the pain in the people who are calling the shots right now. But those guys are in pain, you know. And I think that's kind of where you were saying the Buddha comes from—that we have to understand that people really, if we treat each other with kindness and loving, won't be cruel. If we can understand each other a little bit more, understand the pain that causes this behavior."

Thank you, Nancy, because I can feel the inspiration. Homeboy Industries and Father Greg Boyle is a real inspiration for me, from his first book, *Tattoos on the Heart*. I can't recommend it highly enough. He takes people who would be thrown away—not just some of them undocumented, but people who've been in prison for murder, for shooting one another—and he loves them. And they change. He sees their pain, and he also sees their goodness. And he has a word I wouldn't usually use—Father Greg has a wicked sense of humor.

"Oh, he does."

And that's another power we have: to make art, to make this into humor, to turn where we are into something different, which is really what you're saying. So I feel your inspiration, and I thank you for sharing it.

It's funny because I get so inspired reading Father Greg's books. We've done a few events together, and Trudy and I have both gone down to Homeboys. I said to him, "So where do you get your inspiration?" He said, "Oh, I listen to podcasts from this guy, Jack Kornfield." And it was like, oh my God, I admire him so much—but I guess you take it wherever you can find it.

Then our Teamster poet spoke up. Those are two words that are not often put together, I understand.

"First, thank you for this—as usual, the treasured moments that we spend together, even online. You're a great inspiration for me and many others. Although, if you want to start up the live gigs again, I'd totally drive up to Spirit Rock. And thank you for shouting out World Central Kitchen. As a practicing Buddhist, I cannot support any militaristic action. But you still want to do something for people who are suffering. And World Central Kitchen does that."

Yes. I have friends from Ukraine, and they have said to me that outlying villages away from the cities would have starved to death were it not for that work. Excuse me—it chokes me up a little bit.

And then I wanted to say something about taking action. Because of the pandemic, a friend of mine, Miguel, who had been doing some work for me—he's legal—said to me, "Man, it's really tough. All these people, you're getting checks from the government to stay at home. But these immigrants who don't have the papers have no support. There's nothing coming in."

So I started making phone calls and we got together a few projects in the neighborhood and in other cities. I live in Martinez. These people mostly came from a place called Bay Point. And we got some work together for these folks and put some money in some pockets.

Well, you know, maybe recently you noticed that there was a march on immigrant day, when every Hispanic business, practically speaking, in the Bay Area shut down for a day. The Mexican restaurants were down. The corner stores were down. People just stopped. And better than that, some of the South Asian owners, recognizing that although they had some advantages that the Hispanics did not, they shut their liquor stores too. They shut their corner businesses too. And they had a march out in Bay Point.

My friend Miguel said, "You want to come?" And this is what I'm suggesting to everybody that's gathered on the screen now. Find out where that march is. Having old white people with gray hair standing with them says something to them and to the broader world around us. That needs to be said. Let them lead. But do your walking meditation in a march supporting what you believe. And believe me, you'll never run out of tamales—they came over the bag like this, you know.

Give it a thought. A lot of us are living on Social Security or in retirement. It's not a long drive. These neighbors are not too far away from you, and they're waiting for you to help them.

Jeff, what you say—what was said before by Nancy—you're both just putting your heart out there and saying, this is what matters. This is where I went to Homeboys. I went to this march. You're expressing that care from your heart and your life. Thank you for doing it. Thank you for reminding us. We all need to hold hands together in difficult times. And I feel you reaching out with your hands and your heart. And yes, World Central Kitchen is extraordinary—to feed one hundred million meals. It'll get you out of the house, get you some exercise. Away from the TV for a while with all the nonsense. Be well and happy.

Padma. Lotus.

"First of all, thank you so much for being the elder, reminding us to let go of fear and stand in solidarity, and also to stabilize the mind and not let it go a thousand places. When Nancy was speaking, what came to me was that in spite of doing all the things I do at work—seeing people from where they are, being able to do that—as soon as she said we should be nice to each other, the first thing that comes to my heart is, 'Well, let them be nice. Then we will be nice.' I hear that tone inside me. And at this point, I have to acknowledge that this is where I am. This is how I feel. It's not like I can deliberately go and be rude to anyone. But even when I'm driving, I'm suddenly thinking, 'I wonder if the car in front of me is a Republican car or a Democratic car.' And I'm very sad that this is what it has come to. But I also appreciate that I am on this path. I'm not letting go. And I'm very grateful that I have met you."

I'm touched, and I thank you. Also, you've said some things that are really important. First of all, you've said you have some not completely loving and charitable thoughts. No one else listening would have that problem—you're the only one among us. But the fact that you fess up to it is itself actually rather comforting to other people, because I myself have had at times what one might call un-Buddhist thoughts toward people.

But then, because we've learned to practice, I see them. Even in traffic—it's a small thing, and it's not who's a Republican, but who's driving in a way that's cutting people off. And I can feel the reactivity, and it's become really a practice for me. If I feel myself being reactive, whether it's that or something on television, I picture them as a five-year-old kindergartner going into school. And here they are—wide-eyed and innocent as kindergarteners. Yes, they can get in fights and a whole lot of things, but basically there's still an innocence of heart in almost every child who goes in. And I see them that way. They're in the big adult body driving or running something or speaking, but underneath is that child of the spirit. And when I do, there's a kind of metta that comes, a softening of, "Oh yeah, this one too is in there. Let's figure out how we do this together."

So I'm glad you brought it up so honestly, because that's also important for us. And if I remember, your work is as a physician, is that correct?

"Yes."

So you never really do anything of use. But the thing is, I'll tell you, that if any of these people—even the ones that you might, how we say, judge—were to come to see you as a doctor, you would love and care for them. And I want you to feel that even right now, that that's really who you are. All that other stuff comes, that conditioning—we have it. But who you are, feel that. It is that person who would care for anybody who came to see you as a doctor. And that's your pledge, but it's really your true nature.

So thank you, Padma.

That could be a good place to stop. What I hear from Nancy and Jeff and Padma is our good hearts. We admire whether it's going to Homeboys and seeing the transformation of people that you would think would be thrown out—and Father Greg doesn't throw anyone out of his heart—or Jeff and his work, or Padma. This is actually who we are. And we need each other to remind each other to stand up, to be honest—

And with that honesty, also to be really loving. It's so funny talking with Padma—it's as if her mind has no pride. It'll do anything. It does all these things. But you can feel her good heart in evoking her work, her care as a physician. That's really true, as it is for Jeff, Nancy, and you.

So may these teachings that have been carried for thousands of years to this time give you sustenance and reminder and courage, strength, and love.

Thank you.

Good to have a moment of quiet. I'll see you out there. Wherever we are, we'll do it together.

Good night.

CHAPTER 53

Presence and Heart Now More Than Ever

Jack Kornfield · 1h28

> *In this heartfelt talk from Spirit Rock's Monday night gathering, Jack Kornfield addresses the collective anxiety and grief many feel during times of political and social upheaval. Beginning with a guided meditation on mindful loving awareness, he invites practitioners to discover the spacious consciousness that witnesses all experience—thoughts, emotions, and sensations—without being overwhelmed by them.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh, Gary Snyder, and the wisdom of Black Elk, Kornfield emphasizes that the way we respond to difficulty matters as much as what we do. He shares Thich Nhat Hanh's instruction to 'let your walking be the peace you want for this earth' and Gary Snyder's advice to save the world not out of guilt or fear, but out of love. Using the metaphor of imaginal cells in a chrysalis—cells that carry the vision of flight even as the caterpillar dissolves—he suggests we are living through a great turning, a difficult but necessary transformation.*
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> *The teaching weaves together stories of Thomas Clarkson's 30-year campaign against slavery, a veteran's unexpected protection of a nurse, and the cellist of Sarajevo playing amid bombed ruins. Throughout, Kornfield reminds us that underneath our fear and anger lies profound caring, and that one centered person can show the way for many. The evening concludes with community dialogue and a collective blessing, affirming that we face these times together.*

I'm zooming in from the Sierras near Lake Tahoe in Truckee, where I'm visiting my six-year-old grandson Desmond and his parents. Trudy and I are up here in the snow, and it's been wonderful and tiring. Six-year-olds have a lot of energy. "Come on, Baba, let's do this and that and this and that." Anyway, it's been great. And now I'm happy to see you all.

If this is your first time coming, our Monday night class has been ongoing for 39 years—30 of them or more on the land at Spirit Rock, and before that, nearby. The format is really simple. It invites you, whoever you are, to come together for us to sit in meditation with a little bit of guidance to start, for 20 or 30 minutes. Then we take a break for five or ten minutes to stretch or relax, and that's usually followed by a talk or teachings, sometimes with dialogue. Tonight will be a little bit different. There'll be a semi-talk and maybe a lot more dialogue. We'll try that.

Let me pause before we meditate. Sometimes people think meditation is an invitation or an approach to have a particular experience or state—even that very basic one of quieting the busy mind, or calming in the midst of anxiety or planning or worry, and then getting some deeper understanding. All those things can happen. But the real point is to come into the reality of the present. This is all we have, actually—this moment. The past is a fiction. The future is a fantasy. Memory and fantasy. What's alive is just now.

To come into this present moment with mindful, loving awareness is to notice the play of our human experience and to discover that we can take our seat with a compassionate and gracious heart, with a freedom that is your birthright and mine, in the midst of all the coming and going of feelings and thoughts and memories and plans and emotions. We take our seat, sometimes beginning quietly with the breath, inviting a sense of calm and ease, noticing the play of experience. We become the mindful, loving witness—mindful, loving awareness itself—spacious and gracious.

With that, I invite you to find a way to sit that's comfortable, at ease. Let your body rest. When you're ready, if you're comfortable doing so, allow your eyes to close gently.

Begin by taking two long breaths. Settle yourself here in the present moment. Let your body relax. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Maybe roll your head in a little circle to release your neck, then let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and let the arms and hands be easy. Feel the whole weight of your body and how it is met by the seat and the earth below. Relax and settle into your seat. Let yourself be fully supported and at ease just where you are. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with compassion and kindness.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of this present moment with loving awareness. For those of you who are somewhat experienced in meditation, you might want to begin by simply sensing how the body breathes itself. Feel it as coolness in the nose, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly—the whole body. It breathes all by itself. As you feel it, invite a sense of calm and ease with each breath. Calm and ease, relaxing with each breath.

This breathing with mindful, loving awareness is not avoiding the world. There's turmoil, difficulty, problems and suffering, concerns we all share. This is a centering of yourself, a quieting of the mind, a softening of the heart, so you can be fully present before you respond to this world—before you respond wisely, with courage and compassion. First, be here. This breath. Steady. Easy.

As you feel the breath, when the attention drifts off, just bring it back gently.

Relax into this breath just now. Feel it, rest in it, swim in it. Let all the other thoughts and worries and plans and sensations rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel the ocean wave of the breath—calm and steady. This breath breathing its own rhythm. Rest in the reality of the present as the breath arises.

As you settle and come to an ease, centered, invite the sense of mindful loving awareness to open so that you can notice the waves that rise and fall around the breath. You feel the breath, and then all of a sudden the attention is pulled by a thought—remembering something, imagining, planning, thinking, picturing. When it happens, as soon as you're aware of it (not right away often, but when you are), you can acknowledge it as if with a little bow: remembering, thinking. You are the loving awareness that notices that wave of thoughts arising. Then return back to feel the breath in the middle.

Just as mindful loving awareness can notice the thoughts and words and images, it can also notice the emotions—sadness, excitement, fear, love, longing, desire, frustration. When they arise, as if with a bow, you can acknowledge: oh, sadness; oh, excitement; oh, longing; oh, joy. Let that wave of emotion be felt, let it rise for a time like a wave, and pass away. Then back to a few breaths again. Just here. The reality of the present. This breath and the waves around us.

Notice now too that just as you can be aware of the breath with loving awareness, just as you can notice the rising of thoughts and images, of emotions or sensations in the body—these waves that come and go around the breath—you are not the breath. You are not the thoughts and feelings and sensations. They all come and go. You are the consciousness, the space of awareness, of loving awareness, that notices the breath and the experiences.

Rest in the space of loving awareness, of consciousness itself. Relax. Open. Timeless. Present. Spacious. The breath comes and goes. Waves of experiences arise for a time and pass. And you are the loving witness, the awareness itself.

Loving awareness is vast and open. It allows for all things. The joys and the sorrows arise and pass. The longing of love. All of it. And here you are, seated like the Buddha herself, himself—the compassionate and loving witness. Spacious. At peace. Rest in the present. Relax. You are the consciousness. You are the awareness itself.

Finally, let this loving awareness be filled with tenderness and compassion. It is love itself—for all that arises, all the beauty and the pain. You rest in the great heart of compassion and the vast consciousness of the awakened heart and mind.

When you're ready, allowing the sense of spacious loving awareness to continue, let your eyes open gently. Feel yourself centered in eternity, which you are—the reality of the present, where all things arise and pass. Look around. Let the sights in with a gracious heart.

Now, before we take our break, which we will in just a minute or two to stretch or relax, a reminder: the word mindfulness means *sati sampajañña* in Pali or Sanskrit. It has two parts—it means mindful presence and mindful response.

You see, we're mostly practicing in the sitting: mindful presence. As you heard, they say in Zen, there are only two things—you sit and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is, the garden of the world. Breathing in, breathing out, we sit first.

I remember teaching at UCLA with Thich Nhat Hanh at a very big conference on Eastern and Western psychology, a couple or a few thousand people. It was time for walking meditation. That particular weekend, or those few days of retreat, the US had commenced bombing somewhere—I forget where, but we're always bombing somebody somewhere. Sad to say, that's part of what we do in this world.

I was wearing a black armband, as were a number of people who came, as a kind of protest to remind people that we didn't stand for bombing, that that wasn't what we wanted. And I said to Thay, to Thich Nhat Hanh, "Well, we could give black armbands to the other thousand people who don't have them when we go out and do our walking meditation across the UCLA campus."

He paused and looked at me and said, "No." He said, "When you walk, just walk. Let your body, your steps, your walking be the peace you want for this earth."

It was a beautiful moment. When you walk, just walk. Be that.

And again, you sit or quiet yourself or even walk slowly. And then you sweep the gardens. I have to say, to use Ram Dass's phrase—boy, oh boy—it sure feels good to sit together with you in these times. So thank you.

Welcome back. Before I start to talk this evening—because often I'll create a kind of crafted talk of teachings and examples and stories in a systematic way, and then we have a conversation afterward—for tonight I want to do something different. I'd like to be able to speak but also to respond to where you are, to what your concerns are, to what themes you wish we could touch on. Perhaps we'll have some dialogue with this. So I invite you to put into the chat the themes or topics or words—what you're looking for, what you're hoping for, what's going on for you—that we might talk about together.

Let's see what comes up.

How to cope with the stress and anxiety of the current administration. The destruction in the country. Balancing self-care with compassionate action. Stability of heart. Uncertainty. Grief. Fear of sickness. Maintaining sanity while watching destruction. Balancing doom scrolling with head in the sand. Being overwhelmed. Self-care versus activism. How to send love and blessings to all people. Compassion with boundaries. How do I focus on the positive and stay present? Giving my gifts. Watching late-stage capitalism disregard humans. The despair of the news. How to help those with memory issues to remember how to meditate. How to understand that there are other views of what's going on. Remember that spring always follows winter. I do not feel guilty for feeling safe.

Oh, well. This was going to be a couple of hours, but I'm afraid we'll be here all night. Might as well relax.

What I love about hearing from you, even though it's difficult, is somehow the sense that we're in this together.

How do I stay centered? How do I take care of my family? How do I quiet myself and also act in the world? And how to do so with a joyful heart? How do I deal with the struggles? How to avoid or work with feeling overwhelmed?

And if you look at the screen and see the little faces in the squares, or you're on the Facebook live stream or whatever, we're in this together. And it doesn't mean there aren't some conservatives on the screen. There are some really important conservative values, the best of them, that we need. So this isn't a political statement, but it's a Dharma statement.

As Thich Nhat Hanh repeated often: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person remained centered and calm, it showed the way for everyone to survive. And you know who that one person is. That's how the world is made. It's made from us, from our hearts and our being.

So maybe the first thing is simply that we allow ourselves time to be present, to walk in nature, to turn off the damn news. You know, you kind of know the plot. It's like reading a Shakespearean tragedy in many cases. You know it. Quiet your mind, tend your heart. And also, as you do, perhaps not get into the game of blame, of who's right and wrong.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian activist and author, said: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary simply to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our heart?"

In a way, what we're seeing is really a symptom of our humanity. Here we are, twenty-first century, late stage capitalism, which has gotten to the place where there are extreme divides between rich and poor, exploitation. And we're at the time Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning, the great opportunity really for us to reset our lives as human beings.

What's also true about the Great Turning is that it's a birth process. I don't know how many of you have given birth, but I imagine looking at the screen that some of you would raise your hands. And it's messy. It's painful. It's dangerous. It's difficult. We are in some kind of birth process. All the things we see are not just terrible things, but they're also symptoms of our fear as human beings. We're kind of wired to fear the other. And our politics is all about fear. The great commentators about politics said, you know, the whole aim of politics is to frighten the populace into voting for you. That was a hundred years ago, that commentary.

But that's not who we are at heart. That's the small separate self, the body of fear. The Buddhist texts also begin: "Oh nobly born, remember who you are." Remember your fearlessness in the midst of it all. Center yourself.

Thomas Jefferson said something like, "One person with courage is a majority." I used to have on my refrigerator a picture of that Chinese man with the shopping bag standing in front of that line of tanks. Remember that image? After Tiananmen Square, the tanks stopped, and he had his shopping bags.

But how do we do this? We have to stay in the present. Because if you let yourself get drowned by the news and the fears and the thoughts, you'll go swimming and rising and falling in the ocean of grief and fear. And that's not who you are. Meditation invites you to have a very different perspective.

When a butterfly makes a chrysalis, we used to think as kids, and we were told, that it would grow its wings. There's the caterpillar and it had some wings and it comes out and it flies. But now we know all the science shows us something very different. It dissolves. It becomes a gelatinous mass of cells, some of which are related to the old caterpillar, and some other cells which have a beautiful name.

They're called imaginal cells. And these are the cells that picture that they can fly. I mean, what a wild thing for those cells to believe. But honestly, they do. They carry that image, that imagination, that possibility. And apparently there's some struggle there in the chrysalis about who's going to win out. Can we go back to the old caterpillar? I don't think so. And gradually the imaginal cells begin to build the wings of the butterfly.

But it's not easy. Things fall apart. And I say that lightly, but actually there can be tremendous suffering, and we can see it. Part of our practice and our training is the capacity to bear witness to the ocean of tears, as well as the wondrous glory of the world and the universe. The beauty that surrounds us. And nature keeps showing us amazing things. It keeps getting reborn no matter what you do. It will be reborn. It will push through the cracks in the sidewalk. You try to pave it over—baby, it's coming back. It's just what it does. It renews itself.

So there's a kind of trust that's asked. And there's a story—remember Black Elk? Black Elk was the great medicine man of his people, and he was celebrated. He had this beautiful vision on Harney Peak about the circle of life, and part of the vision was the way his people would again come together and live in the harmony they had before.

In the beautiful biography *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt, who interviewed him and lived with him at the end of his life and became partly his voice—he was with Black Elk. And Black Elk was an old man now at the end of his life, as Neihardt writes. He wanted to go back and visit the top of Harney Peak, where he had been blessed by a vision of the sacred hoop of the world that inspired his whole life and so many people.

So he put on his finest headdress and painted himself as one does to meet the gods, and took a sacred pipe and asked for a blessing, honoring the goodness and beauty of the sacred tree. He walked up to the top of Harney Peak, and Neihardt said it was a clear blue sky. Yet Black Elk had told him that if his life was of any value, the rains would come. This is a very dry part of the Dakotas, but the clouds would part and bring some rain as a blessing from the Great Spirit.

He climbed up. The sky was perfectly clear. There were tourists looking at this old man in his headdress and paint, wondering. And it was in the midst of a season of drought, one of the worst in years. He lay himself on the ground at the top of Harney Peak and made a prayer that if he had lived righteously, the gods would somehow bless him with rain.

And Neihardt said, to his astonishment, some clouds appeared just over that part of the mountain, and a light rain began to fall. Black Elk lay there and smiled and somehow knew—even though he didn't succeed in reweaving the sacred hoop in the way that he intended—that his life was not in vain.

There are some bigger forces than what you know. Bigger than politics, bigger than even climate change, bigger than AI. And these are all huge forces—don't get me wrong. But in another way, they're trivial. They're trivial compared to the forces of the turning of the seasons and the return of life. As Pablo Neruda says, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

There's another force. And that's what we're asked to remember. Something mysterious and great. To quiet ourselves and align ourselves. And then, of course, to begin to act—but to act not in the way of fear.

I tell that story—I might have told it a month ago—of my beloved friend and colleague Wes Nisker, who died a couple of years ago, visiting Gary Snyder. Gary Snyder, the great environmentalist, now in his nineties, who got the Pulitzer Prize for his environmental writing fifty, sixty years ago with *Earth Household*. Wes said, "Gary, the oceans are rising, the deserts are growing, refugees everywhere, animals going extinct, the ice flows melting. What advice do you have? You've been an environmentalist for more than half a century."

And Gary looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty. Don't feel guilty. If you want to save it, don't save it out of guilt. Don't save it out of fear."

Don't save it out of anger. Because the guilt and the fear and the anger are what has created our human problems. This is the source of it. If you want to save it, save it because you love it. That's the force that makes a difference. That's the power that does so.

So what you do when you meditate is you let yourself sit with heartbreak. How many have heartbreak? Don't bother raising your hands. We know you. How many have felt guilt or fear? And then here's Gary saying, don't save it out of fear, out of confusion and guilt, doom scrolling, all these things which will come in these times.

But the end of Mary Oliver's poem about the last day of the Buddha, where he lies under the two sal trees and his last words as the trees break into blossom—he looks up and he says, "Make of yourself a light." It's usually rendered as "be a lamp unto yourself," but Mary Oliver's better than that. She says, "Make of yourself a light."

So I'm going to pause for a moment. We could get practical in a few minutes. But I'm really talking about the value of learning how to embody that nobility and dignity that is who you are. We human beings go through horrible times—world wars and tremendous human-caused suffering. How will you carry yourself? And what light will you carry? Because you can, you know.

How are you doing? I go to nature to relieve the grief. Do it out of love—such a powerful message, because it's a shared message. We see each other. We're actually holding hands in spirit, even here.

And do you know why you get afraid? Do you know why you get angry and upset? Because you care. Underneath all that—the fear and the anger and all of it—it comes because you care. And in meditation, the invitation is to drop beneath. You can see the anger and the fear and all that. That's being human. Like Solzhenitsyn said, who doesn't have that in their heart? But underneath that for you is to sense that care.

Poetry helps. Arts help. Music helps. A bigger picture. "I feel like I should be doing something and make a difference, but what?" "Do it out of love breaks my heart open."

A couple of days ago, being up in Truckee, there was a big demonstration of people out on the street who were concerned about the firing of USAID and the money that would go to feed children who are hungry or starving, would go to give medicine to those who are sick. And the thing that struck me—Truckee's a small town, I think three or four thousand people—hundreds of people came out, and there were so many creative signs. It was amazing, the creativity. So many people came out for a long time. It took about a day to organize. And it was done by a high school student. He said, we've got to get out there.

And he started calling the other students, and they all started calling their friends and their parents and their cousins. In a day or so, hundreds and hundreds of people in this small town appeared with their signs of love and their signs of concern. Of course there were signs of frustration and anger too—there were all of them. Part of what struck me was how creative it actually was, when you're standing up. It's here. It's in us.

And you say, well, what should I do? Go out in nature, supported by children and grandchildren. They're rooting for you. Sometimes it's just small things. I think about Italy during the pandemic, how people began to sing to one another from the balconies when they couldn't visit each other. And then they began to bang their pots, remember that? It's really simple. We should have a pot banging day for people who are concerned.

It also helps to have a big picture. If we think about the Great Turning, I remember being on the top of Mount Tamalpais—I've talked about this before. Some years ago, Mount Tam is the 2,500-foot mountain in the middle of Marin County, our local mountain, and it was the day of the passage of the planet Venus across the face of the sun. I drove up because I had read about it, and at the top there were a bunch of amateur astronomers who had brought their telescopes, some with pretty big ones. I got to look through a big telescope, and there was the sun.

If you get to look close at it, first of all, it's kind of wiggly. It's not like a bright orange disc. It's like looking into a fiery, moving, amazing thing, constantly alive. It's astonishing to see how alive it is. The sun is considered a being or a god in so many indigenous cultures—they could be right, you know. This thing was really alive in these ways.

And then at one corner, there was this little dark marble, very tiny compared to the big disc of the sun. As I watched for five minutes, I could see that it moved a tiny bit. I went away and came back, and it had moved a little further. And then I realized—oh, that's Venus. It's about the same size as planet Earth, like us. The same size. And it wends its way around our great star like we do.

There's this vast space and these little tiny marbles going around our star in this wonderful way. And then we get upset. "Sometimes I go about pitying myself," said the Ojibwe, "when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

There's something about trusting—Black Elk's vision—that there's something bigger. And then you're called in the darkest times and the most difficult times to remember who you are and to treat one another from that place of dignity and respect, as those who are nobly born. In a way, that's what we've been practicing for, some of us for a very long time.

And it doesn't take a lot, you know. Gestures of kindness. Asking others how you can help, and then tuning and listening: Who is doing things that make a difference? Is there a new underground railroad growing to shelter people who otherwise might be in danger? Would you want to be a stop on that underground railroad, if that was the right thing for you?

We will get through this, and we'll get through it because we do it together.

There's an amazing book called *Bury the Chains* by Adam Hochschild. It's the story primarily of a man named Thomas Clarkson. Thomas Clarkson aligned himself—he might have been a Quaker, or he aligned himself with the Quakers—and he was one of the activists in England fighting against the slave trade. In the 1700s and 1800s, a lot of the wealth of the British Empire came from slaving and then from slave plantations,

slave colonies, penal colonies, especially in the Caribbean islands and Central America and all those places where you can grow sugarcane. Sugarcane was the oil of the time, and it brought great wealth.

And they knew, the Quakers especially knew, that this was immoral and it was wrong. And six of them got together in an English tea house and said, "We're going to change this." They all vowed in their own way to make a difference. Clarkson in some way became the head of them, and he rode for thirty years. He rode tens of thousands of miles back and forth across England, meeting especially with the English gentry and the people who had wealth or power or in some way were part of those who ran the society.

He brought with him often an ex-slave, somebody who had been somehow released or able to get to England and who was well spoken, who described what it was like—the middle passage, to be chained in the hold of a ship with hundreds of others and no food, what it was like to be whipped and beaten. And here in the nice parlors of the English gentry, Thomas Clarkson went from place to place to place. Thirty years it took him. And at the end of it, it wasn't just him, of course—it was a movement from the Quakers and others. The English Parliament came together and with the force of their movement, they outlawed slavery. They probably did it in stages, as I remember, to be accurate. First, no more taking of slaves, then no more keeping of slaves.

I'm telling you this because it takes a while, especially in times of huge social change. But you—you are the imaginal cells. You are the ones who are called to hold the vision of a wise society where people respect each other, where we care for the vulnerable, where we understand the universal teachings: hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is you.

One person shared that on Saturday in the city of Berkeley where they live, there was a large demonstration at the Tesla store in southwest Berkeley. There were going to be six or eight hundred people there. And there was anger—people would drive by in Teslas and they would say, "Sell that car, sell that car." But what they wanted to share was that the mood was joy. People were just so happy to be together, all these folks coming out, and it was a joyful occasion. They stopped traffic, blocked the whole street. After a while somebody built a cardboard Tesla, about eight feet wide, eight feet long, carried on sticks covered with aluminum paint, traded back and forth among the people. It was a joyful occasion, and they wanted to reassure everyone about that.

I really appreciate the spirit of it, that it was done, that it's not done out of great fear or great anger. Now, I need to be honest. I bought one of the first Teslas, and I still drive it. People want to give me the bumper sticker: "I bought this before Elon turned into

whatever." I really appreciate the concern about Tesla, but more deeply, it's the concern about what's happening in our government and the kind of things that the Department of Government Efficiency, DOGE, is doing. I was talking to one of my dearest friends who worked for the World Health Organization. And he said, "Do you know what it's like to hold children who haven't had enough to eat?" Because he worked in the refugee camps. He said, "That's what I'm worried about."

So thank you both for the joy. And also somehow it's funny to hear that the old lefties were having a good time—they've got a cause now. May it work, you know. But it's not just them. It's our children. The gathering that happened in Truckee had families and kids and it was also joyful. If we're going to change the world, let's do it out of love, out of joy.

Another person shared that they are an AIDS researcher and have worked for four decades with very vulnerable populations—women at risk for HIV in Africa and sexual and gender minority people. Their group is heartbroken to see these vulnerable populations come under attack.

And we're trying to find a way to make some noise and make the cuts that have been made in PEPFAR and other USAID programs palpable for people in America. And it's been very hard. A lot of our international collaborators who could give us the data to show the impact are afraid. They feel so vulnerable. They're afraid to participate, which is even more heartbreaking.

Of course, we're old friends. I'm glad to see you. I know as a physician that you've given your life to this work of bringing medicine that saves people, that keeps families and mothers and children from dying across many parts of the world, and that your whole team and all the things you do now feels like it's being taken apart, undermined. So that's the tragic part.

And I think your willingness to name it as part of our community, to ask us all to carry it with you so that you're not alone—I invite you to look at all the little squares if you shift your computer so that people can gaze at you and look back and say in their own way with their eyes: we're with you. We hear you. We want to help. So look at that so you feel that's there.

And then also know, as you say, you're doing everything you can to make changes. It isn't the end of the story. We go through a lot of cycles, and this is a destructive one. It may have some tremendous suffering in parts. It may also have lessons we don't even

know. It's so mysterious, you know. It really is. And what light can you carry? What spirit can you carry? What helps you? What's the most helpful thing now that you're carrying your lamp in the darkness?

"Well, I think I take a lot of solace in the feelings of solidarity that people are coming from all different backgrounds. There's a Stand Up for Science movement. There's other people who can feel the pain of these destructive acts. So community is really central."

The solidarity, all those people who gaze back at you with their eyes of compassion and also care and respect for all this beautiful work that you've done. And you are one of the imaginal cells, kind of remembering: okay, we can do this. We can have things fall apart and we will respond and we'll envision and somehow we'll rebuild something. But for right now, it's also very difficult. There's no question about it for the kind of things you're talking about.

I think about Vedran, and I carry his picture sometimes. Vedran Smailović, who is the cellist of Sarajevo. Here he's playing in the bombed-out National Library of Sarajevo. For the three years that Sarajevo was under siege—mortar fire, people couldn't get in and out except for UN helicopters—it was a really terrible time. And Vedran, who'd been in the symphony, would put on his tux and take his little folding chair, and wherever there'd been a mortar fire or a bombed-out building, he would go in the day that followed it and seat himself in the middle of the crater and play beautiful music so the people of Sarajevo wouldn't give up hope.

That's what's asked of us too—to bring our music even in difficult times, to bring art and beauty and care and love more than anything else, even more than the fear and concern.

Anyway, thank you for all your years of service. And I have just one terrible thing to say to you, kiddo: you ain't done yet. And I trust you. You know how to do this. You've done it in really hard places. I know you have. You've gone to the ends of the earth. It's been hot. It's been terrible. People have been sick. You've been the doctor.

You know how to do this. And you're not done yet. You have things to do.

I hope we can be effective. I hope so too.

Let's pause for a moment. The help that can come also arrives in unexpected ways. If we're open, if we show our own humanity, sometimes it's surprising what appears and who joins us. You have to trust this as well. You know that it could happen.

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a Veterans Affairs hospital. The work was a challenge in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I'm actually a lesbian. My growing discomfort with the question seemed only to egg them on.

Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since that body had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward where patients could become aggressive and angry, argumentative. Sometimes I didn't feel safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a threatening manner. Just as I was starting to worry, an equally large veteran with dementia quietly stepped between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere and stood nearby in silence, and I felt safe.

I've retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

And it is our family. Now, of course, families are weird. In most every other culture, when people are referred to, the honorifics are familial—uncle and auntie. We have wacky uncles too, demented uncles even. We won't use their names, but they're our relatives because we're all family. In the end, we're woven into an inescapable garment of destiny, as Dr. King says.

We can't fix it or change it. We can't change the suffering, but we can bear witness to it with our tears and our hearts. And remember that we're even bigger than the suffering. Then we can reach out our hand, each of us in our own way, to mend the places that we can touch, to care for those in front of us or around us, or to join together in community with others who care.

And that care changes people. Just that alone begins to make a difference. It becomes a kind of movement—the movement of caring. This is compassion. It's really simple. It's not easy.

You look at the dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, and they both suffered as much as anybody. Their countries and all that's around them, all the responsibility—the loss of Tibet, the killings in South Africa—they're right in the middle of it. And yet they bring this huge compassion of heart and joy. Why should I let my heart be taken over? Let me bring beauty into the world, and compassion, and love.

And you can do that too.

"Therefore, I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood," says Mary Oliver, our modern great poet. "And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular, and each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth."

I think of Ajahn Chah's forest monastery when the fighter jets and bombers flew over during those years of the wars in Cambodia and Vietnam. Our province was on the border of Cambodia and Laos. The monastery was a deliberate island of peace.

He said, "I want people to remember what's possible—not to close their eyes or turn away, but to become a light." Make of yourself a light.

So I thank you for tonight. Thank you for what you have shared. Thank you for your good hearts. Thank you for your profound caring and for the sense of community that we have.

I invite you to look at one another. Let's be quiet for a moment and practice a little metta, wishing well for all these faces before us. You know, these are your sisters and brothers, your uncles and aunties. They are.

Offer each one a blessing from your heart—courage, support. We're in this together.

With gratitude, blessings, and love to all.

CHAPTER 54

Be Joyful Though You've Considered the Facts

Jack Kornfield · 1h50

> *In this deeply moving talk, Jack Kornfield draws from Wendell Berry's wisdom to explore how joy is not merely pleasure or happiness, but a radical understanding of our human spirit—and one of the essential factors of enlightenment (bojjhaṅga). He weaves together teachings from the Dhammapada with stories of the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and Mahā Ghosānanda to demonstrate how the most awakened beings maintain joyful hearts even through immense suffering.*
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> *Kornfield identifies what genuinely brings joy: integrity (sīla), generosity (dāna), gratitude, trust in the long arc of justice, and mindful presence. He shares the powerful metaphor of imaginal cells—how transformation emerges from apparent dissolution—and the concept of being a 'make-weight' whose small presence can tip the scales toward peace. The talk includes a guided meditation on breath awareness, wonder, and reconnecting with the joyful child of spirit within.*
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> *The evening unfolds into a rich dialogue where practitioners share their experiences of finding joy through compassionate understanding, overcoming fear to join protests, and discovering that deeper connection reveals unshakeable goodness in all beings. Kornfield reminds us that we catch joy from one another, that our hearts are not meant to be colonized by fear, and that the world—as Allen Ginsberg proclaimed—is holy.*

Hello, dear ones. Welcome to Spirit Rock Online, Monday nights with Jack Kornfield and friends.

Spirit Rock is located in the San Geronimo Valley of West Marin County, California, on unceded Coast Miwok territory. We name the history of this beloved place as a gesture of respect and reparation toward the indigenous residents of the colonized land we now call home.

We welcome you all, all parts of you—your color, culture, beliefs, gender, orientations, abilities, ages, education, and economic status. Please fully take your place in this circle.

We've been meeting, some of us on Monday nights, for forty years. Most of those years were on the land at Spirit Rock—thirty years there—some before, and now a bit more infrequently online. It was every week for about thirty years. All during this time,

it's really been a way for people to come together to quiet the mind, tend to the heart, reflect on teachings and values of compassion and loving awareness and mindfulness, and to share in this.

The format tonight, as usual, is very simple. There will be a guided meditation to start, followed by some quiet meditation time—probably about thirty minutes. Then we'll take a break to stretch or relax for five minutes. After that, as usual, there will be some teachings, followed by a period of questions and responses or dialogue.

Whatever brings you here, welcome. As Ileana suggested, all parts of you are welcome. The Dharma doors, the Dharma gates, invite you to take your seat—this place halfway between heaven and earth, in this extraordinary human form—and to remember the capacity we have to awaken, to be present, mindful, alive, and also loving and compassionate in the midst of it all.

So let's begin with some meditation. Part of it will follow the theme of this evening's talk. The great farmer-poet Wendell Berry wrote, "Be joyful, though you have considered the facts."

Let yourself settle for this time. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently. Take two or three long breaths. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a circle if you like, just a little bit, to release the neck, and let it find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax. Let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body and sink down into the seat. Sense how you can be completely supported by the seat, the chair, by the earth beneath you. You can relax and settle into just here, taking your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this meditation of awakening.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, establish the quality of mindfulness—mindful, loving awareness. Begin simply by noticing the body breathing itself, without trying to fix or change. Notice if the breath is soft or shallow or deep or irregular. Let it breathe as it wishes.

As you sense the breath—the coolness in the nostrils, the swirling tingling in the back of the throat, the rise and fall of chest or belly, or the whole body moving—relax and sense that it is the earth that's breathing you, the ocean of the air. You're being breathed by life.

As you relax, you can invite a sense of ease and calm to come with this kind attention to the breath. Breathing in and out, inviting a sense of ease. Noticing the breathing rhythm, inviting a sense of calm and quiet. Breathing gently, let the mind quiet and the heart soften into presence.

Naturally, as you sense the breath, there will be all kinds of other experiences that arise. Thoughts and plans and memories, images. Other sensations in the body, warm or cool, pleasant or unpleasant. Sounds that come and go. Emotions—sad, happy, worried, excited. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. No need to stop them or fix them. Feel how the breath moves quietly in the midst of them all.

Sensing the breath invites you to become the loving witness, the mindful, loving awareness that notices the moods that come—sadness or fear, longing, love, joy, connection—that lets you notice the streams of images or thoughts that pass by. And like the breath itself, you quiet, feel its rhythm, and you witness the rising and passing like waves of the ocean.

You rest in the middle, breathing quietly, still. You are the awareness itself, noticing the arising of experience. You are the quiet, steady witnessing. Timeless, present. Allowing for all things, all the waves to rise and pass. Quiet in the middle, undisturbed, spacious presence.

As you sit quietly, notice how the thoughts and images, as Rumi puts it, come trooping out of emptiness from nowhere. Let the sense of wonder arise—amazing, the breath breathes itself. Images and appearances arise and pass. Let yourself sense the wonder that was born in you.

Remember your best adventures as a young child. Call upon the child of the spirit that can wonder at a flower or pebble or the mystery of a tree. Mary Oliver's line: "I was a bride married to amazement."

With a sense of wonder, allow there to be joy. The child of the spirit rolls down the grassy hill, plays with whatever is here. A joyful heart, inviolable, still within you.

You carry within you the gift of awareness and a profound joy just to be alive, to see and touch and taste. May your wonder increase. May your joyful spirit shine even amidst it all.

Keeping the sense of mindful, loving presence and the spirit of wonder or joy, when you're ready, let your eyes open gently. Notice how you feel. Stillness, presence, kindness.

Happy to be with you.

I'm seated here at my desk in San Rafael, California, looking out across a bit of green grass to a crab apple tree in full bloom. It's still before sunset, so it's beautifully lit. One of the things about crab apple trees is that they have these amazing, gorgeous pink and white blossoms and their green leaves at the same time. You get this contrast of green and white and pink all together in a kind of magic form. And then in the black acacia tree on the other side of our house, near the water, lives a very big owl that hoots—might even hoot during our talk—that I get to hear outside my bedroom window, especially when it flies about at night.

It's spring, you know, here at least in the Northern Hemisphere. And I was reflecting on what to talk about tonight because the last couple of months of teachings really had to do with politics and wise society and how we respond to all the craziness happening around us. It felt important to complement that with a teaching on joy—and what the Dalai Lama calls having a positive attitude.

Joy is different than hope. It's a deeper knowing and a bigger thing than pleasure or happiness. In fact, it's one of the essential factors or qualities of enlightenment—necessary for enlightenment and an expression of enlightenment. Joy as a factor, a necessity for enlightenment. How's that?

And it's so fitting in the spring. I think of the great poet Pablo Neruda's line: "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's something that wants to renew itself and bring beauty into the world no matter what crazy human beings—us—do.

Now a question, of course, is how can we have joy in these times? When we've defunded USAID and there will be hundreds or thousands or millions of people, many children, who won't have medicine for malaria or HIV. When we've defunded education and scientific research. When I read that the National Park Service took down the webpage about the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman, took her picture off, and simply said something like "the Underground Railroad is one of the most significant expressions of the American civil rights movement"—taking about a whole page describing leading people out of slavery and that entire transformation, all gone, as if it didn't happen. But of course it did.

So how do we have joy when there's chaos, disruption, suffering in so many ways?

What I've seen in going into refugee camps is that they don't really want you to be depressed. They have enough of that on their own. They're not looking for people to come in frightened and worried and depressed, but actually to come in with an uplift, with possibility and joy.

I think about my dear friend Wavy Gravy, the cosmic clown, who half a century ago at Woodstock, after a rainy night following a lot of the great rock bands, got up on stage early in the morning and said—in the mud of it all—"What I'm envisioning is breakfast in bed for 450,000 people." And their tents began to pass out food to as many people as they possibly could.

Wavy Gravy, as a clown wearing his red nose and his big clown suit and shoes, spent a lot of time going into children's hospitals. He specialized in going into burn units—if you can picture children who've been badly burned. And he would go in and, as he said, "I would lead with bubbles. Before I even went into the room, I would blow the bubbles and start to laugh. And I'd get the attention of the children who'd been suffering so much. And then I'd hit them with jokes and playful things."

We need each other. We really need to remind each other, as we did in that meditation at the end with joy, that there's something immense that we're a part of. And that suffering is not the end of the story—it's the beginning of the Four Noble Truths. We don't have to be so loyal to our suffering.

I went out for demonstrations on Saturday in Marin. There were 6,000 people. In San Francisco there were tens of thousands. And the feeling was so warm-hearted and joyful and peaceful at the same time. There were, of course, amazing creative signs, things like: "It's so bad, even introverts are here." Or "I'm not a sign carrier, but holy fuck." Or "History teacher against bad history." Or "I didn't grow up saying liberty and justice for all every damn day to accept anything less." "Jesus would be deported" was one of the signs.

And I've been giving out red cards—in Spanish and English, or in Tagalog and English, different languages—for those who are undocumented, as a kind of protection. You can order them online. I've gotten some thousands of them. They explain your civil rights: "I do not wish to speak with you or answer any questions or hand you any documents based on my Fifth Amendment rights in the Constitution. I do not give you permission to enter my house based on my Fourth Amendment rights under the Constitution unless you have a signed warrant with my name on it. I do not give you permission to search any of my belongings."

I choose to enjoy and exercise my constitutional rights. These cards serve as a kind of protection.

So here we're talking about some of the difficulties that are happening. And then you have Howard Zinn, the great historian, who says to be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It's based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something of benefit. But if we remember the times and the places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and the possibility of sending the spinning top of a world in a positive direction.

So is joy okay? As I again quoted from Wendell Berry, our great farmer poet: be joyful though you have considered all the facts. And I love looking at the Book of Joy with the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. There they are in their conversation, these old friends meeting together. They said, "We laugh more easily and we cry more easily and we connect more deeply." When they got together with all the cameras there, Tutu said, "It is so joyful to see you," but then added to the Dalai Lama, "Hey, remember the cameras are on—we have to act like holy men." And they both broke into gales of laughter. Then Tutu started teasing the Dalai Lama: "All these people come to see you. You get more people than me. They come to see you and you can't even speak English properly. What's the story?" And they tease each other.

But in the end, their message is to say: do not let the heart be colonized by fear, by hate, by confusion. All that's happened to the people of Tibet, in apartheid in South Africa—they had enormous suffering. "Why should I let them take my happiness?" says the Dalai Lama. "Why should I let them take over my heart?"

I love that image I carry of Vendran Smailovich, who played his cello in the bombed-out National Library of Sarajevo. During the war, when Sarajevo was besieged, wherever there had been mortar and bombing, the next morning he would put on his tux from his time in the National Symphony, bring his cello, and play music so that people would not give up hope.

Part of this is that we catch joy from one another. We can bless each other. We can heal each other from our hearts. Joy—Rumi tells us—do not sit long with sadness, my friends. When you go into the garden, do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time with roses and jasmine. And on Rumi's tomb it's written: "Ours is not a caravan of despair. Welcome, lover of life, wanderer, worshiper. Even if we have broken our vows, ours is not a caravan of despair." Something bigger.

And this is really what joy is. It is the joy of life renewing itself, even though it takes a long time and wanders through some pretty dark places. You remember this passage from the Dhammapada: "Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate." Here's the Buddha giving you mainline Dharma. "Live in joy, in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, be still, free from fears and attachments. Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

Joy is a radical understanding of our human spirit and possibility amidst it all. I think of my teachers—Ajahn Chah, whose forest monastery was in the province next to Cambodia and Laos where the wars were happening and the bombers and fighter jets flew overhead. I think of Maha Ghosananda going back to Cambodia after the enormous genocide and loss. I think of the Dalai Lama after fifty, sixty years, unable to return to Tibet, watching the destruction of the culture. And they're some of the most joyful people I ever met. Loving, present, joyful. It's a radical thing.

Yes. There's guilt, there's doubt, there's unworthiness.

There's fear that maybe if you're joyful or loving, somehow there's not enough goodness to go around. Or in some ways we've learned to be loyal to our suffering. We all have a certain measure of suffering that's given to us—cosmically, if you will—by human incarnation. And we're called upon to meet it with compassion and a loving heart and joy.

You know the great poem that I read so often from, called "A Brief for the Defense" by Jack Gilbert. I won't read the whole long poem, but these lines: "If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of those living in deprivation. We must risk delight—not pleasure seeking, but deep delight. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil." In defense of joy.

So there are joy meditations. And spontaneously in deep meditation practice, when the mind gets very still and concentrated, light begins to arise. In the texts, there are twenty-five kinds of joy: bliss and thrilling joy, and cool joy where the body feels like a vastness of silent coolness, and joy of illuminated colors, rainbow joy—so many kinds of joy.

I remember when I was a new monk at Ajahn Chah's monastery, learning to meditate. I was practicing walking meditation. I'd been there for maybe a month or two, trying to find my breath and concentrate with my crazy mind, learning how to go out on alms round with my bowl and not drop my robes in the middle of the street—which happened to me once. Just trying to be a good person, a good young monk.

I set a candle by two trees in the forest next to my hut, a candle by each tree. There was a little walking path that I'd swept on the forest floor. I was walking slowly and mindfully, really concentrating. And then all of a sudden, I felt my body grow taller and taller, like I had taken a bite out of Alice's mushroom in Wonderland. My head was up in the limbs of the trees and I was filled with this lightness and joy. I paused and said, "Wow, this stuff really works." It was the first experience of that kind of meditative bliss. Of course it didn't last, but it gave me something to realize—okay, you're on the right path.

Now, having a joyful heart is not about not caring, but something bigger. When you read the history of the years of the Buddhist teachings, there was injustice. There was a tremendously oppressive caste system, which the Buddha stood up against. There were people being enslaved. There were lots of wars, and he did what he could to help stop some of those wars. But that wasn't his main thing. His main thing was, as Ajahn Chah would say, to teach people to step out of the battle, to find in their hearts and their consciousness an embracing of life that's steady and loving and peaceful and joyful.

I once asked Thich Nhat Hanh why he taught so much about sitting and smiling, because sometimes he seemed kind of sad to me, and I said that to him. He said, "That's why I teach smiling." He said, "I've seen so much suffering. People killed." In his school in Vietnam, all these young people came to the school he created for peacemaking, and it was attacked by both the North and the South Vietnamese. Young people he brought together who were killed, bombed, shot. So he said, "I've carried so much grief and suffering. I have to smile. I've had to find joy." And you become, even in spite of the suffering of the world, you become a lamp—as he was.

Gandhi put it this way. He said, "I believe in the unity of all things. And therefore I believe that if one person gains, the whole world gains. And if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent." Thich Nhat Hanh was one of those who gained and passed it along. But it's each of us—we become a make-weight.

I think of that photo I had on my refrigerator for many years, of the line of tanks in Beijing around the Tiananmen Square time. That Chinese man—you all know that photo—standing in front of the line of tanks with two shopping bags of groceries, just gazing at them. And them unable to move further because of his presence, his courage, his dignity to stand there and say no.

So when I speak of make-weight, it means in the old days—still now when you go to many markets and you buy rice or mangoes or asparagus, whatever the vegetable—there are the two pans. They put the goods you want in one and then the weights, half a kilo or a quarter of a kilo, and they come close to balancing. And then there's this little line of tiny weights.

Sometimes they're in the form of little animals, little turtles or little birds or something. And they put a couple of make-weights in, and finally the scales balance. It doesn't take much, these make-weights. And yet the whole scale can tip—just like that man in Beijing with his shopping bags, stopping the entire roadway filled with oncoming tanks.

Doesn't always happen quite that way. In war and in difficult times, sometimes that doesn't work, and it's too dangerous. But if there's a shred of morality, a shred of decency, it's an extraordinary thing. Non-violent standing up has an incredible power.

So there's a kind of inner courage that you have as a human being that no one can take from you. That child of the spirit, the original wonder and innocence, amazement, and that care and courage—because you know what's right. You absolutely know it.

Pause for a moment. I'd like you to reflect: What is it that brings joy, even in difficult times? And what is it that brings you joy? You can think about it—walking in the woods, time with people you love.

Here are some of the Dharma teachings that point to a deep level of joy. One of the things that brings joy is our integrity. From one of the Buddhist texts:

Others will be cruel. We shall be kind. Thus shall we incline the heart. Others will be greedy. We shall be generous. Thus shall we incline the heart. Others will speak falsehood. We shall speak truthfully. Thus shall we incline the heart.

Not very complicated. Reflect on it. We know this. Integrity.

I love this story from the Christian Desert Fathers, translated by Thomas Merton. The holy Abbot Anastasios had a very fine Bible on refined parchment with a jeweled cover. Once a certain brother came to visit, and seeing the book, made off with it. That day, when the abbot realized the brother had taken it, though he was sad, he didn't send after him for fear that the brother might add perjury to the theft.

Well, this brother went down into the town in order to sell the book. He asked sixteen gold pieces from the buyer of antiques, who said, "Give me the book that I may find out whether it's worth that much." With that, the buyer took the book up into the

desert to Anastasios and said, "Father, take a look at this book and tell me, is it worth sixteen gold pieces? Should I buy it?" And the abbot said, "Yes, it's a fine book, worth at least that much."

So the buyer went back to the brother and said, "Here's your money. I showed the book to Abbot Anastasios, and he said it's a fine book, worth at least sixteen gold coins." And the brother replied, "Was that all he said? Did he make any other remarks?" "No," said the buyer. "Well," said the brother, "I've changed my mind and don't want to sell the book after all."

He hastened back to the monastery and begged the abbot with tears to take back the book. But the abbot wouldn't accept it, saying, "Go in peace, brother. I make a present of it for you." But the brother said, "If you do not take it back, I shall never have any peace. For I found here what I was looking for." And he joined that community around Abbot Anastasios and lived there for the rest of his life.

It's your integrity, unshakable integrity, that brings joy of heart. Think of the situations in your life where it really matters.

And how you get boosted up and strengthened.

It's also generosity—taking time and love and care, serving, being there for others. We get happy when we can give. If we can't give, it's a really impoverished life, because we are knitted together. And the heart knows this. Our joy comes when we find our ways to give.

Father Daniel Berrigan, an activist and of course a spiritual leader, said: "Sometime in life, hope that you might see the look on the face of a starving man when the bread finally arrives. Hope that you might have baked it or bought it or even needed it yourself. For that look on his face, where you're meeting his eyes across that piece of bread—you might be willing to lose a lot, or suffer a lot, or die a little." But that is what brings joy. Generosity, offering, serving makes the heart grow open. We know it and we can do it, especially in these times.

Integrity, generosity—what else brings joy in our life? Gratitude. There's a beautiful website for Brother David Steindl-Rast, all these teachings on gratitude. Gratitude of seeing the beauty of life itself so much.

You know, after the Buddha's enlightenment, as the stories are told, and they are told often, one of the first things he did was to move a distance away from the Bodhi tree and sit for seven days and gaze at it in gratitude for sheltering him. Garden and nature feel the gratitude of the trees that are breathing oxygen, taking your carbon dioxide

and feeding you, working for you, loving you, all around you. They're loving life by transforming carbon dioxide into oxygen. Look at the things in your life that you have. Look at the relationships. Look at the mystery around you. How can you not feel gratitude?

One of my favorite books, and I've been rereading it lately, is Father Greg Boyle's *Tattoos on the Heart*. If you haven't read it, it's an astonishing book of stories of Homeboy Industries and who he's worked with over the years and all the suffering in the community—how many young people were thrown in prison, how many were shot, the gang wars. And Homeboys in the middle of them showed another possibility: come join us, step out of the gang, come back when you're out of prison, we'll get you a place in the community.

One of the stories he writes about is an eighteen or nineteen-year-old young man named Spider, who he said was raised in the village there with his sister, abandoned by his parents. And somehow they managed to get enough food and eat somehow. And then he came to Homeboy Industries. He'd been part of a gang and they were shooting at one another. And he said, "I can't do this anymore. I want a family." He had this girlfriend, they got married. He came to Homeboys, and Father Greg helped secure him a job as a hospital orderly moving patients and equipment. And he felt so proud of himself. They moved into a little apartment and they had two small boys.

So Father Greg was driving and he saw Spider out on the street, not so far away. And he said, "Here, I'll give you a ride home." And they talked for a while about his life, and he was thanking Father Greg for helping him get the job. "How's it going?" And he says, "I'm okay." He said, "You know what I'm going to do when I get home right now? I'm going to sit down to eat with my lady and my two boys. And well, I don't eat. I just watch them eat. My lady, she gets crazy with me, but I don't care. I just watch them eat. They eat and eat. And I just look at them and thank God they're in my life. And when they're done eating and I know they're full, then I eat." And the truth, sometimes there's food left and sometimes there isn't. And he smiled and he says, "You understand. It's a father thing."

Gratitude—you can feel the tenderness in this, just to be able to watch his boys eat and feel that he could care for them.

What else brings joy?

Trust.

The moral arc of the universe may be long, said Dr. King, but it bends toward justice. Trust means a long view. "Enlightenment," says one of the great patriarchs, one of the founders and ancestors, "enlightenment is one with a trusting heart." To be without anxiety about non-perfection.

And even as things get taken apart around us, even with concerns about widespread suffering, there is another image that's important to keep in mind, and that is the imaginal cells.

When a caterpillar spins a cocoon and goes inside, we usually think—I certainly did as a kid—that it's in there and then it grows its wings and comes out and sprouts as a butterfly, which looks like it has a little caterpillar in the middle and these huge wings. But that's not how it happens at all.

Inside the chrysalis, there's this extraordinary dissolving in which that caterpillar becomes a mass of fluids and cells, completely unorganized. And then among those cells, as it divides and dissolves, there's a handful of cells that scientists call the imaginal cells. They're the cells that know that they can fly, that know within them and within the brother and sister cells there is the possibility of creating this amazing being of a butterfly. And they start to organize all the other cells, sometimes apparently with some resistance from the other cells, as the scientists watch. And the imaginal cells build the butterfly.

Trust. Trust that it's possible, and not only that it's possible, but that in your heart, you can make a difference.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a tiny mouse once asked a wild dove.

"Nothing more than nothing," came the answer.

"In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the mouse said. "I sat on the branch of a fir tree close to its trunk when it began to snow. Not a blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without a wound, without any violence. And without anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs. When the number was exactly 3,741,952—when at that moment the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped onto the branch, nothing, as you say, nothing like nothing—the branch broke off."

And having said that, the mouse went away. And the dove, an authority on this since the time of Noah, thought about this to herself and said, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice lacking for peace to come into this world."

Trust that you make a difference and that each one of us makes a difference.

And then mindful presence brings joy. The awakened heart, knowing that we can hold all the things of this world in awareness, in mindfulness, and in love. To become fearless, to turn toward that which is difficult with a vast and open loving awareness.

And we help each other. That's why sangha, community, is one of the great refuges, one of the three refuges—our connection with each other. We need to remind each other that we're in this together, that we can awaken together, that we can support the beautiful heart and mind and the beautiful world that we can be. It is here and it's in us as part of our own imaginal selves.

Some years ago, on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Seattle, a young mother stopped to talk with a local priest. Her five-year-old daughter, Carmen, had a new jump rope and began to demonstrate the intricacies of the jumping rope. While at first she began to jump and the priest and the mother clapped for her skill, the priest said, "Let me show you." He gave her a little more instruction and she became able to jump quite well on her own. With all the new skills, she went off with her rope quite happily.

The mother and this young priest chatted for a few minutes until Carmen, with the saddest eyes, returned dragging her rope. "Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."

Here we are in our meditation where we started—remembering your best adventure as a child, the child of the spirit, feeling the loving connection that we all long for and how much we uplift each other.

And then there's the mystery along with this amazing connection. The mystery that life exists. Where did it come from? How did we appear? You think you have to fix it and make it your way. But there's something so much bigger that breathes us, that brings life into being. Consciousness arising.

A poem from Malachi Moran:

I tried to explain to the flowers on the banks of the river that they honestly had chosen an awful time to sprout. I detailed all the nuance of international tariffs and suggested they wait a bit to see how things shake out. They swayed with polite attention as I outlined my position.

on the effects of the weakened dollar and the day's stock market rout—but I do not think they listened, as they lifted their heads defiantly, and their azure petals did not display any doubts as they stood up.

You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. They come again.

It's a kind of fearless joy. It's the joy I saw in Maha Ghosananda in the refugee camps. It's Molly Ivins, the great activist, saying: "So keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloved, but don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous, rejoice in all the oddities of humanity and freedom, and celebrate the sheer joy of a good fight. And when you get done, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was to fight for what really matters—to stand up for it."

The world is a holy place, and you get to live in it and love it and celebrate it.

And one of the really remarkable poems of our modern history, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, ends with a footnote or coda that begins: "Holy, holy, holy, holy—the world is holy, the soul is holy, the skin, the nose..."

And he goes on: "Holy the solitude of the skyscrapers and the pavements. Holy the cafeterias filled with the millions. Holy the mysterious river of tears under the streets. Holy the vast lamb of the middle class. Holy the crazy shepherds of rebellion. Holy New York and San Francisco. Holy Peoria and Seattle. Holy Paris and Tangiers. Holy Moscow and Istanbul. Holy time in eternity. Holy the clocks in space. Holy the fourth dimension. Holy the sea. Holy the desert. Holy the railroad, the locomotive. Holy the visions. Holy the hallucinations. Holy the miracles. Holy the eyeballs. Holy the abyss. Holy forgiveness. Mercy. Charity. Faith. Holy our bodies. Our suffering. Holy magnanimity. Holy the supernatural, extra brilliant, intelligent kindness of the soul."

We sit. We quiet the mind. We tend the heart. We see as a Buddha on this amazing, astonishing planet. We see with the eyes of tenderness and wisdom and compassion. And we bring our joy, our love to this world, which so needs it.

Reflect for a moment on what it's like when you meet someone wise, strong, who brings joy into this world. And reflect now on what it's like when you are that being—on those days and times when you carry a joyful spirit amidst it all.

What a gift.

Nancy, hello.

Hello.

I had this book in my purse today.

Oh, you do? Have you read it?

I read it a couple of years ago, and I had it in my purse to reread it.

It's worth rereading.

It is. And one of the things—I had mentioned a couple of times ago with you that I had just been to Homeboy, and I had *Cherished Belongings*, his latest book. And I know that one of the things he says is that the two principles of Homeboy are: we are all unshakably good, no exceptions, and we are all connected to each other, no exceptions.

And I guess my question is, when you read from the Dhammapada about "others may be greedy, but we can be generous," something along those lines—I feel like if we keep saying that others can be greedy and others can be this or that, maybe we're not quite understanding the pain that the others have to be that way. Which is something that Father Boyle just points out so well.

Yes, he's remarkable and honestly kind of saintly consciousness. And he does point out that underneath all the rest of it is really pain and suffering. And so there's a huge compassion in it, which is what I see with people like the Dalai Lama or Maha Ghosananda too. And they might name it. The Dalai Lama said the Chinese are his favorite enemy. He doesn't say they're his favorite buddies and friends. He even uses that word *enemy*, but he talks about it because they are in a way in that role.

So you make a beautiful point about how we see one another. And even in that text, maybe it should say: when we see others being greedy or fearful or dishonest, we can remember—because this is a translation—that we can be honest, we can be generous...

And compassionate for them.

And compassionate for them. Yeah. Does that work for you?

Yeah, it does. And I was just listening to one of your videos, and you said the exact same thing, I believe. I even wrote it down. I believe there are no evil people—that evil people are carrying... I don't remember your exact words, but are carrying a burden of hurt.

Yes.

And abuse, the family abuse, goes from generation to generation.

So let's just pause a second because I'm so appreciating what you're pointing to, Nancy. And it's really deep. And I love you correcting the Buddhist text too. Thank you. That's chutzpah. I really appreciate it.

I want to pause and I want you to just quiet—and people who are listening—and feel what it's like in yourself to see, in the eyes of Father Greg, who sees a tremendous amount of suffering and violence, people shooting at one another around him and

killing and dying, and what it means to see with the eyes of compassion, to see that we're all in it together, as you point to, that we're all connected, and in the end, we're all good.

You're pointing us to this: that we might live this. What an extraordinary consciousness you invite. How does it feel?

Yeah. It's very moving, isn't it?

It's very moving.

Well, thank you. Thank you for the teachings.

And I'll correct the text as necessary.

You know, one of the things that I keep thinking is: if punishment really worked, we wouldn't be punishing people anymore.

Well put. Yes, it's love alone that heals in the end. And understanding—understanding the pain that people go through.

A new participant joins the conversation.

So the first thing I wanted to point out is that there is a force greater than love or hate or jealousy or anger. And that is the deep, deep desire we all have to edit the texts. I'd rather edit than eat.

Laughter. Well, there have been thousands of years of people editing the texts, so you have a long tradition behind you.

The other thing was in relation to the woman who was speaking just before me, and to a broader view. A few years ago, the Dalai Lama spoke at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles and took questions. I only heard this on tape—I was not present. One of the questioners was an LAPD police officer and a practicing Buddhist who said he had constant difficulty because he had to deal with people doing horrible things. Sometimes he had to act forcefully to make them stop. And the Dalai Lama's answer was, "Think of the good that you are doing—stopping them from further ruining their karma. You give them the chance to be reborn."

I don't know if that exactly says anything to anybody, but when I'm faced with my own anger and hatred and resentment towards situations and the people that cause them, I remember that. Okay, we don't try to make them disappear—we try to contain them so they have the opportunity to reflect and perhaps change.

This is a compassionate reflection that is adjacent to, related to, what Nancy just talked about—seeing the suffering and then responding with compassion rather than with our own hatred. How do we contain the harm and then hopefully make the possibility of something good come out of it eventually?

These are the hardest situations. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama at one point—one of those typical moral quandaries—"You're there and there is a person with a gun who's going to shoot a lot of people. You could stop them by shooting them. Would you do it? Should you do it?"

The Dalai Lama said, "Maybe it's the right thing. I couldn't do it." It's very interesting. He just said, "I couldn't take a life. And maybe it's the right thing." That's part of our human dilemma. Solzhenitsyn said the line dividing good and evil exists in every human heart. How do we find our way through this with compassion?

Who knows? There's no set answer. I remember Joan Baez responding to someone who said, "Well, what would you do if this happened, then that happened?" And she said, "I only respond to realities."

and not to made up examples of what might happen. It's impossible to know what you'd do given extreme circumstances. For me, hopefully I wouldn't take the life either.

Here we are with some of the big human questions. How do we hold suffering? How do we hold those who are causing suffering? How do we find compassion for the pain underneath it all? What Allen Ginsberg called "the mysterious river of tears underneath the streets."

Someone is asking if I could share the website about gratitude. The website is from Brother David Steindl-Rast. It's a whole beautiful training on gratitude that he has offered. I think he's like ninety-eight or ninety-nine years old and still out there offering these gorgeous teachings of a grateful life. For him, for Brother David, who's an old friend, the practice of gratitude is the central spiritual practice—to say thank you, thank you for it all, even the difficulties. Those are the ones that make the heart grow deeper and more compassionate.

One participant shared: "I just wanted to say what brings me joy is babies. Even just looking at a picture of a baby, it can soften the heart so easily. Saturday, after a lot of contemplation—my husband is not in town, and it was a big undertaking for me—I finally decided for the first time in my life I would stand up and go stand in the protest.

"Going to the protest wasn't such an easy decision, I realized. And I looked at the fear and how much fear there is that I never, ever had to experience before. It just really made me feel very humble and recognize how much suffering there is on both sides. It is all coming from fear. I just got up in the morning and I said, okay, what is the worst that is going to happen? Am I going to get arrested? Okay, let's go see what this feels like. Made a copy of my passport, put it in my pocket, picked up a friend who was also brown, and we went to whatever was happening in our town.

"Looking at all the people that were there—really, really elderly people showed up in their wheelchairs. It was just impossible not to have compassion. I don't even recognize what moment I forgot about fear. There was just so much joy to see all the people around. I didn't see myself as anybody different. I didn't see the fear of the non-white person that everybody describes in these days. I was just able to stand there, smile at everyone, look at everybody's banners, just connect—really, truly, without even trying, connect. And that was very joyful. It doesn't need to be that we are standing and screaming. It can be just standing there and smiling. So it was just really good."

You are spreading the joy. Even as you speak, I start to smile, and I imagine others who are here online, listening and witnessing. And it's so interesting for you to say that you had a lot of fear, which is understandable. You could get arrested, you could get thrown in jail or prison.

So let me know. But something happened where that fear became much smaller than the joy and that connection.

Close your eyes for a second and just let yourself feel the joy and the strength that came from seeing all these people together, and how you and they were carrying this beautiful quality. It wasn't fearful at all. In fact, it was a kind of triumph. You could really feel yourself part of it, all that you're describing so beautifully. And now you know it's there in you, so you can use it anytime. What does it want you to remember?

Remember that we are all one. Forget the separation.

Yes. The little kids and the ones in the wheelchairs and the ones in the middle, all together.

I also recently got to hold a baby that was born prematurely and finally came home. This little bud was like a loaf of bread—four and a half pounds, this little boy, very handsome. And it was so cool. It was just like, oh wow. Such an amazing thing. All of us, we were all those babies. You and me, we used to be one of those little ones.

Beautiful. Thank you, Padma. This is beautiful, what you shared.

Hi, Jack. You spoke about what brings joy, and one of the things I realized is that part of it is your expectation. When I was growing up, I was always told that when you get married, you have a honeymoon phase and then you're living real life. I always felt that was backwards. I thought, wait a minute—if I have a long marriage, I could get to know that person. I could find things that they don't even know exist and I don't know yet. Perfection wasn't in the imagination. But I realized that the more you have that closeness, that connection to somebody else—that trust, that integrity you talked about—that is such a joyful thing, something to be so grateful for.

As I've gotten much older, not only do I find this to be true, but I find it in so many relationships. The more I get to know people, the more I understand where their fears are coming from, where their anger is coming from. Perfection is not on the agenda. The idea is to find out who that person could be and would be if only they—who they want to be.

And as we're going through all of these things now, because of the people I've begun to see that way, I have great faith that we will not allow what is happening to continue, that we will not settle for less than the goodness I see in so many people. It doesn't mean I'm not angry. It doesn't mean I don't get scared or disappointed. But there's something there that is so much greater than what's happening right now.

When people think it's romantic to imagine perfection, I don't think that's it at all. I think what's real is that when a person is unhappy, you can be the thing they trust. When they're happy, you can be the thing that makes them even happier, and vice versa. There are so many things in this world to be joyful about. Like Padma said—a child, or being in a group where you suddenly realize you're part of something.

I don't think that's going to be destroyed. I don't think it can be destroyed, because I think that's the stronger thing. It's almost pure energy. What we're looking at now, the destructive part—it's not pure, it's all mixed up and not in the right place. I really believe that as a group, we will not only triumph but bring people along with us who've fallen into this, and they'll be part of it too. Because it's what you said: when you bring something to somebody and open it up to them, often you see in their response the joy they get just knowing it exists and that they could be part of it.

This is just a long way to say I think the more we know and the deeper we go, the stronger we are. There may be things to be afraid of, but I don't think it's our own goodness that we should ignore.

I'm just sitting with you.

The depth of our goodness.

And the point is not to perfect anything except maybe to perfect our love. To be present. And the closeness you described in relationship, how in some ways we get to know the unfolding of another being. What a mysterious invitation that is.

Well, you've said so many beautiful things. It feels like in some way a great place for us to end the evening. There was Nancy teaching us about compassion behind everything from Father Greg and her understanding. There was Jeff speaking about not editing—enjoying editing the text, yes, but something much deeper than that, really, of connection and the good that you do for one another. And Padma going way beyond her fear to realize that there was a joy in her heart saying we're all one. And now you. These are all such beautiful teachings. I thank you all who offered them.

So sweet to listen, to feel, to sense the genuineness and the shared wisdom and the shared compassion.

So maybe let yourself look at all the little squares on the screen for a moment. You could even unmute if you feel like it and just offer your blessings. Send joy and well-being to the hearts of everyone you see on the screen, all these beings in so many forms.

Thank you, Helga, for the "we shall overcome" sign.

All right. Take care. We're in this together, baby. Let's make something beautiful out of it all.

See you later.

CHAPTER 55

Monday Night Dharma Talk: Stories as Medicine

Jack Kornfield · 1h12

> *In this warm and engaging talk, Jack Kornfield returns from a journey to India where he met with the Dalai Lama at a Mind and Life Institute gathering focused on AI and consciousness. The Dalai Lama's insight that compassion requires the capacity to feel pain sets the stage for an evening of storytelling as spiritual medicine.*
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> *Kornfield shares tales from his new book, weaving together ancient wisdom and contemporary experiences. He recounts the transformative power of being truly seen—from Ram Dass's encounter with his guru's 'glance of mercy' to a middle school teacher's profound connection with a difficult student. Through the charming George and Martha story, he illustrates how friends must speak truth with kindness, while the tale of Lieutenant Colonel Hughes in Najaf demonstrates how a gesture of respect can defuse conflict.*
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> *The talk explores intention as the root of karma, offering practical guidance for navigating conflict by pausing to ask 'What is my heart's best intention?' Kornfield addresses the struggles many face—existential angst, anger, the desire for revenge—with compassionate presence and the reminder that we can hold our vulnerability with mettā. Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching about the leaf returning to nourish the tree, he invites listeners into the mystery of existence, encouraging us to rest in the great heart of loving-kindness as both personal practice and gift to the world.*

So, you online people and campers here, I just got back to California not that many days ago. Trudy and I went to India and we went to Dharamsala for a Mind and Life Institute meeting with the Dalai Lama and a number of lamas and contemplatives and a bunch of scientists focusing on AI.

The Dalai Lama was not really teaching much now at ninety, but he did blessings, and I got to have a little conversation with him, which was wonderful. Somebody asked him, "Do you think AI can feel compassion?" And he reflected and said, "Can it feel pain?" You know, he's got this great kind of mind to turn things around. The technologist building it said, "I don't think so." And then the Dalai Lama said, "Well, if it can't feel pain, it won't feel compassion."

That's a really interesting thing—that actually, in order to have compassion, we have to be able to feel. We are in relationship. This is like two different kinds of minds, the silicon mind and the human mind. How many of you spend a fair amount of time en-

gaged with your computers, your phone, television, electronic media? For most of us, it's a big chunk of our time. So our lives are woven together. Part of the question at the conference was: how do we have a wise relationship to it in ourselves? And then also, how do we steer it so that it actually is beneficial for humanity?

After Dharamsala, we went to Varanasi, which is perhaps the oldest existing city in the world, on the banks of the Ganges. We stayed right on the river, and there are the ghats, the docks. There's the bathing ghat where people come down to bathe in the holy Ganges. There's the laundry ghat where sheets that people have been washing are laid out on all the steps. There's the cow ghat where the cows are tied up. And there's the burning ghat, which is amazing, because especially when you go at night, it feels like you're entering Dante's lower realms. There are always fires burning and bodies there.

About every twenty minutes, through the day and through the night, people will be carrying a bamboo stretcher with a body wrapped in silk, chanting, "Ram Nam Satya He"—the only truth is the truth of God. Then they deliver it, put it on a pyre with wood. So there are always bodies burning there. They carry them through the streets.

You might think it's gruesome or weird. But there you are, and you notice, if you pay attention, that there are beggars in Varanasi, especially along the river in the old ancient part of the city. Tied in the corner of their shawl are enough coins to pay for the wood, for the fire, for their cremation. You might look at them with a lot of pity—oh, what a struggle your life is, there you are a beggar. And they look back at you and they go, "You don't get it. I'm in Varanasi." Varanasi is the portal to the realm of liberation, to the awakened, liberated space of life and heart. Anyone who's cremated in Varanasi is saved in the deepest way. They look and say, "You think I'm in trouble? How about you, baby?"

It just melds your mind in these different directions, which is really good because we're all in it together, basically.

So anyway, we had this trip to India and other places. And then I came back and this book came out. It's a lot of my favorite stories, some long, some short. I'm basically a storyteller. I love telling stories. Some of them you'll have heard—they're repeats. I don't mind repeating a story. It's like kids saying, "Read that one again," right? These are not the kind of stories where you say, "Oh, read the next one." You can do that, but you can also read that one again.

For me, stories are a medicine. That's really what's in this book—stories for healing, stories of medicine, stories of awakening, stories of community. We need them. Some have a little humor, or are poignant.

There's the story of a little boy who goes out with his parents. He's seven years old, and they go to a restaurant to have dinner. The waitress comes to take their order and says, "What will you have, little boy?" He says, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." His mother says, "He'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and milk." The waitress goes around and takes the rest of the orders. As she's leaving the table, she turns back to that little boy and says, "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?"

And this big grin spreads across his face and he says, "She thinks I'm real."

There's something both poignant and humorous in that story.

I was teaching up here at some point with a Tibetan Lama, and I was cracking jokes or whatever. And he said, "I get it. You get them to laugh, and then when their mouths are open, you can pop the pill of wisdom in." I thought, well, that's a kind of nice interpretation of it. But there's something else in it too.

Ram Dass talked about how his life was transformed when he met his guru. He tells the same story over and over again. He went there thinking, "Oh my God, another Indian guru." And he meets the guru, and the guru starts messing with him. "That's a really nice car, the Land Rover you drove up here. That'd be great for the guru. Would you maybe think about giving that?" And Ram Dass says, "Oh my God, what a huckster, this guy."

They sit and they talk a little bit, and they get quiet. Then the guru says, "Come close." And he says—being translated from Hindi into English—"Last night under the stars, your mother. You were thinking about her." Ram Dass says, "Well, that's not such a magic thing. You think about your mother." And the guru said, "Big belly, right?" Ram Dass goes, "Hmm." And then his guru says in English, which he doesn't speak, "Spleen."

Spleen, and Ram Dass's mind just kind of breaks open. He said, "Wait a second. Did the CIA come and tell him about my life? How could he know that I was thinking about my mother who died this year of cancer, of the spleen?"

And so when his guru was training him and looked at him—there's a phrase in India called the glance of mercy, where your guru or this person looks at you, and as Ram Dass said, they can see into your soul. And they love you anyway. Like, how could that be? Really, they see how weird you are in every part, and they can say you're completely worthy of love. And it changes you. It kind of changes your DNA.

So that's one of his favorite stories. And what it does is it invites us to imagine what it would be like to be seen in that way, or maybe to see ourselves in that way.

Somebody gave me recently—I was in Hawaii actually, and I met up with these old friends and they said, "Do you remember? More than fifty years ago..." And I had this book. Some of you may know the book of Frog and Toad. Those are great children's stories. But this is a book of George and Martha, who are hippopotami, by James Marshall. I don't even know if it's still in print. I love these images. Five stories about two great friends.

Here's story number one. It's not going to take that long to read.

Martha was very fond of making split pea soup. Sometimes she made it all day long—pots and pots of split pea soup. Here she is in her skirt or apron in the kitchen. If there was one thing that George was not fond of, it was split pea soup. He's frowning. George hated split pea soup. You can hear a kid smiling, of course. "Ew, I hate..." He hated it more than anything else in the world. This is the way a child thinks, right? But it was so hard to tell Martha.

One day after George had eaten ten bowls of Martha's soup, he said to himself, "I just can't stand another bowl. Not even another spoonful." So while Martha was in the kitchen, George carefully poured the rest of his soup into his loafers under the table. "Now she will think I have eaten it."

But Martha was watching from the kitchen.

So there's this picture of his shoes getting filled with split pea soup. Last page.

"How do you expect to walk home with your loafers full of split pea soup?" she asked George.

"Oh dear," said George. "You saw me."

"And why didn't you tell me that you hate my split pea soup?"

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings," said George.

"That's silly," said Martha. "Friends should always tell each other the truth. As a matter of fact, I don't like split pea soup very much myself. I just like to make it. From now on, you'll never have to eat that awful soup again."

"What a relief," George sighed.

"Would you like some chocolate chip cookies instead?" asked Martha.

"Oh, that would be lovely," said George.

"Then you shall have them." And she placed a plate of chocolate chip cookies on the table.

It's just four pages—very, very short. But stories tell us things. And yes, it's for little kids, but it speaks to the way we hide things from one another. What does it mean to actually connect with each other in a more genuine way, in a kind way?

What I hoped from this book is that these are stories that touch the heart—that you read and think, "Oh yes."

Let me share another story. Many of you have heard it before.

This is the story of a middle school teacher in her first year of teaching. She says, "In my classroom I had one particularly difficult young woman." This was eighth grade. "She would interrupt the class, she would stand up and walk around, she would make rude comments, she would disrupt everything we were doing. And I tried every intervention that a teacher knows. I made contracts with her, I praised her, I gave her special rewards she could work toward. I threatened consequences. I went into the teacher's lounge and the other teachers looked at me and said, 'Oh, you have Shay in your class. We're so sorry. Maybe you should transfer her out.' But I was a new teacher. I decided I was going to keep the students they gave me and work with them."

And so it continued through much of the year like that—not easy.

The last day came and the class was dismissed. She said, "I watched Shay walk out the door and thought, 'Well, that was a failure.'" Then about fifteen minutes later, as she was gathering her things at the end of the school year, in walked Shay. She had called the girl's home. No one answered. She had tried to talk to her family. She wasn't sure Shay even had family that paid attention to her.

And what was she doing back? The teacher thought, "One more last act of terrorism in my classroom."

Shay marched right up to her and thrust into her hand a little bowl—the kind students make in ceramics class. On the bottom it had her name inscribed: Shay. She looked at her teacher, handed her the bowl, and said, "Thank you for trying to like me." Then she turned around and walked out.

"I have never left that bowl out of my classroom. Then I became a school principal and a superintendent, and Shay's bowl is right there on my desk."

This is the work we have to do. These are the kind of stories in this book that remind us of what it means to meet each other with deep respect.

There's a wonderful long story many of you know—of Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady, this great ancient tale told in different places.

Chaucer told a version of it. And the essence of this story is the question that was posed to Sir Gawain by the hag that he meets in the deep dark forest to help him find his way out: What do women want? He can't figure it out, so he says, "All right, give me a year." He goes around with this big old book and asks everybody, comes back, and still doesn't have the right answer. And then there's a very magical kind of ending to it.

Part of that story, which leads the first section, along with that story of the little seven-year-old boy and the waitress, is a section on seeing each other with respect. What does that mean? Even the Dalai Lama has used the phrase "my friend the enemy"—that he's unwilling to put them out of his heart even though they're functioning in their role as an enemy.

So I'm reading you some stories, ones I like.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a small bird, a titmouse, asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story."

And this story is really for all of you who have some sense of despair in these times. Wade Davis, the great explorer, says despair is a failure of imagination—that we can imagine something bigger than the troubles we're in.

"In that case, I'll tell you a marvelous story," the titmouse says. "I sat on the branch of a fir tree close to the trunk when it began to snow. Not heavily, not in a giant blizzard, no. Just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the titmouse flew away. And the dove, since Noah's time an authority about change in the world, thought about the story for a moment and finally said, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in this world."

It's a really beautiful reminder. We don't know what will break the branch off, what will tip the direction that we go, but we have the opportunity to reach out and mend something in the fabric of life. And if you don't do it, if you stay in contraction or fear or despair or overwhelm, it actually leaves you stuck in a sorrowful place. It's action that somehow undoes anxiety. It's making even the tiniest difference to others that begins to change the direction of your life, your circumstances, and the circumstances of the world around you.

There are stories of my teacher Ajahn Chah. In the morning we would go out with our alms bowls just at dawn and walk for five miles or however long it was, barefoot, to the nearby villages. The villagers would wait and offer food into the bowls. Mostly it was the older women who would wait. They were the ones who got up early and cooked, and they'd put food in the monks' bowls. They sort of adopted us. We were kind of like their pets or something. They loved us. They would come to the temple while we'd be trying to meditate and get enlightened and stuff. On every week—new moon, quarter moon, whatever—there'd be an all-night sit and we'd be meditating. And these women, they would sit down. They were the great yogis, actually. We thought we were cool. They were much better. They sort of said, "Okay, we'll feed you. We'll take care of you." It was very sweet.

So we were crossing the little dike in the rice paddies, and there was this giant boulder across the field. Ajahn Chah said to the monks who were with him in this little group, "Monks, is that boulder heavy?" And, being Ivy League educated, "Yes it is," right? He smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

There was so much wisdom in that tiny little interaction about how we deal with this world. Yes, you can see it, but do you pick it up?

You have a choice.

There's a long story in here about Vimalakirti, who is a great Mahayana bodhisattva. It's really a story of dueling spiritual teachers. I'm sure you would never imagine that great bodhisattvas and spiritual teachers would have conflict—unless, well, in my industry, the swamis and lamas and mamas and whatever they are, they have their differences. And sometimes it's not even very pretty.

But anyway, it's a story of how they work this out. And of course it turns everything on its head, because the protagonist—the Buddha—sends his disciples to help Vimalakirti, who is pretending to be sick. And so all these great bodhisattvas go to take care of this lay person who's supposed to be much lower on the spiritual totem pole. And of course, he one-ups all of them. It's sort of great because it asks: what are your ideas about how you should be as a spiritual person? These are accounts that are modern as well as ancient, because they're part of our human character—how we work with each other, how we judge.

There's also a long story in here of the Buddha's last year of his life. It tells about all the different things he encountered in his last year at age eighty, which happens to be my age. What was difficult and what was important and what his last teachings were—reminders, people coming. And then how he died, and how that affected people.

The story begins, and the text actually, with a phrase that's pretty much like "once upon a time." Because these big stories—Vimalakirti, or Sir Gawain, or the big story of the Buddha's last year—are really mythological stories, which is to say they're archetypal or universal. And as you read them, you find yourself somewhere in that story. Are you that person coming, beseeching the Buddha, "Give me the last teachings because I didn't quite get it. This is my last chance. Come on, help me"? Or are you the person who gives him his last meal, but it turns out he gets sick from that meal? And then that person feels really bad, thinking, "I'm the person who gave the Buddha dysentery. What kind of bad karma is that?"

And then the Buddha calls him and says, "You don't understand. The first meal and the last meal are like the holiest meals that you can offer. It doesn't matter what happened to my body—it was ready anyway. You are blessed because your intention was so pure." And what matters is really the intention of the heart. And so you read and you get these kinds of reminders.

There are stories of conflict resolution, because—in case you have noticed or not noticed—we are in times of conflict. Political conflict, the poly-crisis: climate, AI, political divisiveness, continuing warfare, continuing racism. What do we do with this?

So this story: In the early years of the Iraq war, an article in *The New Yorker* described how a small unit of American soldiers were assigned to go to the holy city of Najaf, one of the sacred cities of Iraq. This was a delicate mission, as the presence of Americans in uniform was seen as a desecration of this sacred place. When they approached one of the most revered mosques, hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side, fists waving, shouting, throats taut. They pressed in on the fifteen Americans. The reporter witnessing it said he felt afraid. The Americans glanced at one another in terror, afraid that a shot would come from somewhere, that someone would open fire and it would turn into a massacre.

Quite suddenly, in the middle of it all, the American officer in charge stopped, held his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground, and stood there against the backdrop of a seething crowd that was almost a thousand people deep now, shouting. It was a striking gesture, the reporter wrote—almost biblical. And then he took a knee.

The officer, his eyes hidden behind his mirrored sunglasses, held his position and instructed his men to follow. The soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy, and then one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the boiling crowd, pointed their guns at the ground in the same position as their officer. And the crowd fell silent. Their anger subsided, and the officer ordered his men to withdraw.

Dan Baum, the writer of the story, said it took him months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes, the officer in this account. When he found him, he asked Colonel Hughes who had taught him to calm a crowd by pointing his rifle down and kneeling in a war zone in a distant country. The colonel replied that while they would typically fire warning shots in such a situation, the problem with doing so is that the next thing that happens is people start shooting for real. He went on to say the Iraqis felt that the presence of these armed American soldiers was disrespectful to their mosque, to their religion, to the culture of this holy city—and that the obvious solution was a gesture of respect.

What do we need?

In our lives, in the conflicts we face, in the conflicts of the world—to be able to meet one another with that kind of respect changes everything.

I like to talk about this often because one of the key teachings is that more than anything, intention has great power in your life. Intention is the root of karma. What does that mean? Well, suppose there's a person who backs out of his driveway, hits the gas, and crashes through the fence of the house next door into the living room. Now suppose that person did that because he was really upset—his next-door neighbor had cut down all the big beautiful trees on their joint property line, and he was, how do you say it, a little bit pissed off by that. If that happened, the police would come with their blue lights and haul him away.

On the other hand, suppose when he backed out of his driveway the accelerator pedal stuck, and he couldn't help it, and it crashed through the fence into that person's house. People would come out and say, "Are you okay? Is everything all right?" It wouldn't be the police—it might be an ambulance if you were hurt. The exact same act: crashing through the fence into the house. What made the difference? The intention.

So intention is incredibly important in how we resolve our conflicts, how we deal with one another. And one of the most significant tools you have in conflict with other people—should that happen in your life, or if you're in a little argument with the people you love a lot but who aren't behaving the way you wish they would... It would never happen to me as a teacher, of course, but just in case—I'm married to a Dharma teacher, and we would never have an argument. Anyway, if you take a breath in the middle of it, a mindful pause, just half a minute, and you ask yourself, "What's my best intention?" There you are. And you realize, well, my best intention is actually to work this out, to love this person, to figure out our way.

If you ask, "What's my heart's best intention?" almost immediately it changes your tone of voice, your eyes soften, and instead of working to be right—because of course I am right, right?—you shift. But it's not about being right. Would you rather be right, or would you rather be happy? Checking in with your intention is one way we commune, one way we find love. In a moment, your demeanor changes and that person feels it. And all of a sudden, with that kind of respect and care, you're in a different movie—a much more benevolent one.

So, there's another story in here. I'm just telling stories. Is that okay? Do you mind? I mean, that's what we're doing tonight, right? And then we'll take some time for dialogue.

I led a men's retreat here some years ago with good friends—Robert Hall, Tisha Bell, Wes Nisker. We led a series of them. In the evening, after we'd sat together for the day, we'd have a kind of council. We'd sit in a circle, and then Robert or one of the others would raise a question for the men. "Let's talk about money. What's your relationship to money?" And all these men who never talked about that, really, unless it was their business—they would open up. Or, "Let's talk about sex." And it would come out. Or, "Let's talk about the things that really are there in our lives." The men would come together, maybe forming a smaller circle, and six or eight men would come and talk about what they were struggling with. All the other men would be nodding—yeah, me too.

Anyway, one of the themes was also talking about what's our relationship to the men who are much less well-off than ourselves, which is true for all of us. Those of us who are in this room primarily have a somewhat privileged life on this planet. So there was a man in that circle who said, "Well, I have this job." He talked about it, then said, "But on Sundays in LA, I'm a DJ and I have a blues show that I do. I love the blues." He said, "One day I got a letter from a man"—we'll call him Joseph Brown—"and it was one of those kinds of letters. I get them."

You can see in the upper corner where it came from—the correctional institution. And Mr. Joseph Brown wrote and said, "I'm incarcerated here, and I listen to your show." Apparently this fellow said, "I have a big following in the prisons." And Joseph Brown said, "I want to ask you a favor. Would you play some of the early blues greats? Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, some of the original Delta Blues—Mississippi John Hurt, and so forth. I sure would appreciate it."

So the next week, as a DJ, he read the letter out loud and he said, "I'm going to play a few of these great old blues masters." He played Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and so forth. A couple of weeks later, a letter came to him. "Dear Joseph," it said, "thank you for playing that music. It really touched me. This is the first time I can re-

member hearing my name said with respect." Because he said, "This is a man who obviously knows the blues when he announced it. This is someone who's really tuned in to the origins of the blues. I thank him for asking. Somebody finally offered me some respect."

And then we just all looked at each other as men and said, can we do that for one another?

These are stories in here. It's really also mysterious. I mean, here we are Monday night. We had twenty, twenty-five years in the trailers on the land. How many of you were here when we had the trailers? Yeah, a quarter, half of you or something like that. We had bigger crowds than we could have had here, but because of COVID and flu and such, I just wanted to keep it a little less packed in. And we had amazing teachers—Thich Nhat Hanh came, the Dalai Lama came, Tibetan lamas and mamas and swamis and great various teachers. All that was fabulous.

Anyway, one night it happened to be a full moon night that also happened to be Halloween. I'm not making this up. People came a little bit in costume, and we had candy at the door. We'd arranged for the Ganden Shartse monks to come and visit. They were touring. There are a couple of groups—one, the Gyuto Tantra Choir, and the Shartse monks have a tantra choir. They're some of the monks that do the multi-vocal chanting with all the overtones, quite extraordinary. So they were going to come and sing for us before our meditation. This is cool, it's Halloween, it's great.

And then they said, "Halloween, what's this?" And we said, "Well, costumes." They said, "Oh, we can do that too." And they opened their van. They said, "We've got a lot of costumes. Let's do the skeleton dance!" And they pulled out their skeleton costumes and went out in the meadow there under the moonlight, chanting and dancing. And I'm going like, what kind of reality is this that appears in West Marin? How does this happen?

But it's so mysterious. For us, we think we're in charge.

My dear friend Sharon Salzberg—she was seventeen or eighteen years old, a freshman at University of Buffalo. Brilliant, but also with a tremendous amount of trauma. And then she got this little fellowship or something to go to India. She was interested. And the Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to give a public lecture. She raised her hand and she said, "I'm about to go to India for the first time. Which teachers should I visit? Who should I go see?"

And Trungpa, who had many sides to him, shall we say, good and otherwise, but he was quite eloquent—he looked back at her and he said, "Madam, best to follow the pretense of accident."

I thought it was profound and witty. And true. How does this happen? We didn't have Spirit Rock. We looked at places in the Russian River and places down near Santa Cruz—things that were too small, that were too large, that were far too expensive. Some of them were too far away. We wanted it to be closer to the city.

And we gave up after two or three years of looking.

Then a friend from Zen Center called and said, "You know, there's this piece of land in San Geronimo Valley near this little village of Woodacre. It's owned by Nature Conservancy, but they want to sell it to buy rainforest land in South America. They don't need it anymore. Do you know where Woodacre is?"

And I said, "Well, actually, my wife and I have been living in San Anselmo, but we just decided to buy a house in Woodacre. We know it very well. We've been shopping for a home here."

In fact, we had our realtor, and they said, "Well, this place..." We didn't want to build a place, but they said, "Okay, you have to go look." And we came, and of course, it's gorgeous. Alright, it's a lot of work to build a place.

Then this wonderful philanthropist from the East Coast who was also a dharma teacher wrote a note and said, "I hear you're trying to buy some land and build a center. Here's a little check for you—one million dollars." I thought, "Gee, I could go to Tahiti and live a long time with this check." But in fact, the land was $950,000, which all went to buy 50,000 acres of rainforest. And we ended up with Spirit Rock. Why? How? We had no idea.

The same was true for our center in Massachusetts, Insight Meditation Society. We had rented some Boy Scout camps and done retreats in 1975, and we did our first three-month retreat in a Catholic monastery on the coast of Maine, in Bucksport. Actually, it was next to a big logging operation, so people would be sitting and they'd hear the logs being unloaded. Anyway, we held a three-month retreat, and when we finished—there had been a Catholic nun who came—everybody said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have our own place?"

So we started to look. There was a team of a few very devoted students who looked at places. Some of them were giant, too big; some a little too far—all the usual Goldilocks problems: too small, too large, or something.

Finally this place, which became Insight Meditation Society in Barre, had been a monastery for the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament. It had eighty little rooms, a swimming pool, a tennis court, and eighty acres of land. There were seven fathers left there

and three nuns in the annex. The problem was that during the Jimmy Carter years the price of oil spiked, and they were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars just to heat it so it wouldn't fall apart.

They put it on the market for two million dollars. We negotiated and they said, "How about a million?" Of course we didn't have anything like that at all, but they needed to unload it. Nobody wanted eighty little rooms—what do you do with that?

So anyway, it got down to where we could buy it for $150,000. Eighty acres, swimming pool, tennis court, kitchen. They said, "We'll leave the pots and pans." Phenomenal.

But even that was a lot of money for us ex-hippies. There were a couple of friends who had some family money and they each threw in $15,000. We got $50,000 to start, and then went to the bank to borrow the other $100,000. They were going to sign off for it. The bank said, "What are you doing this for?"

"Well, with IMS, the Insight Meditation Society, we're going to make a meditation center."

They said, "Great, how much do you want?" Because IMS were the same initials as the International Meditation Society of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Beatles. At that time, that was a big thing. "Oh, the Beatles are behind this? No problem. How much money? Where do we sign?"

We did not correct the misperception. They gave us the money.

And what can you buy for $150,000 now? So something mysterious unfolds. As the Ojibwe say, sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

There's something so mysterious about how things unfold. Some of them are terrible—it's not like it's all easy. But we live in something so huge and magnificent, and we get into small mind about how it should be. You don't know. We honestly don't know so much.

So, the last thing I'm going to read from Thich Nhat Hanh:

I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer, I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I'm not

limited by this form. I am also now the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. So I don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I'll see you again very soon.'"

This is Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes as if it would be a children's book, but it's like deep children, right?

That day there was a wind blowing, and after a while I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree again. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from the leaf, because it is not afraid. It knew that nothing can be born and nothing can die.

There's something in the stories that we tell. We come together for the Dharma, which means the law, the way things are—and it's really the truth of love. And mystery. Being able to be in the presence of mystery.

It's weird. I don't know how you got in there, in your body. Do you? You don't remember, do you? But you got here for some reason, and then you have this human body, which is a strange thing. I talk about the hole in which you stuff dead plants and animals and grind them up with the bones and glug them through the tube. And then you have eyeballs—they're weird. And ears that stick out, mine pretty far. And then I can wiggle my tongue and say "Eiffel Tower," and you can see the Eiffel Tower in your mind. Nobody knows how that happens. Yeah, the tympanic membrane and the little electrochemical signals to the auditory cortex... "Eiffel Tower"—come on. No one knows how it happens.

You have a little vestigial tail reminding you of your past incarnations. You ambulate by falling one direction as a biped, catching yourself, and then falling the other direction. It's a weird thing. If you don't think that's weird, pay attention when you make love. It's a cool thing to do—I love it—but it's bizarre. It is. I mean, come on, let's get real.

So here we are in this mystery, and part of our meditation is yes, you quiet your mind. Yes, you see that with attachment things get worse, and with love and graciousness things get easier. But also there's this invitation—for liberation and for wonder, instead of holding on.

I mean, can you speak a little bit not about my own intention, but about giving people grace with their intentions?

So keep the microphone for a second because I might want to ask you a question. Thank you for this. This is a really good question. What makes you ask it?

It's a struggle I have. It's a practice to come back to not reacting.

And who are you struggling with? Where is that?

Driving, a lot of the time. Driving in traffic, on the road.

Driving—oh God, those people, yes. And I'm one of them because I was a taxi driver in Boston for three years. I got some very bad driving habits. I apologize.

But all right, so now picture yourself driving and some nasty driver cuts you off, or gets upset and gives you the finger and cuts you off. Close your eyes. All right. So your concern is with their intention. And they might just be pissed off, right, or something. Now notice how it works in you when you see that and you're upset about their intention. How does that feel? Just notice. What do you notice, keeping your eyes closed, in your body?

Gripping.

Gripping. Tight.

Attachment to the energy.

Yes, attachment. Okay, just feel that. No judgment. You're noticing it.

Now let your attention open as you picture that car that cut you off and that person driving badly. And imagine that they just got the news that their child was in an accident and is in the hospital. Or that their mother fell and is very sick. Or they might get fired and they're so upset and they're trying to race to get there. So there they are, doing the same terrible action, cutting you off and so forth. How does it feel when you picture it then, when you sense that this could also be happening for them? What happens?

There isn't the tension.

It releases the tension. Because you're not so certain that they're just being an asshole, basically, if you'll forgive my language. Right. You might even feel compassion for them if you knew their story.

So here's the thing—this is great, thank you, and thank you for doing that inside. You cannot really know the intention of someone else. There's only one person whose intention you can really know. Guess who that is? As Miss Piggy would say, *moi*, right?

And so intention is primarily for yourself. Because the intentions of other people can be all kinds of things and you can't really know them. But what you can do, and what matters—I think of Thomas Merton writing to this burned-out activist who said, "I just... people are acting so badly, and I don't know if it's going to be worth anything." And Merton says to him, "You have to focus not on what they're doing. The work you do may succeed. It may not. It may make things worse. That's not what's given to you."

You have to focus on your own heart and on the value and the rightness and the truth, the best of the work you do yourself, and leave it to unfold the best it can.

This is a really important question, and you've sort of started to reflect on it yourself, because we can get rather positional when people are behaving badly—and there are lots of them. But we don't know what's behind it all. Some of it may be terrible, and some of it may be that they're really angry, whatever. But even under that, there's something bigger. And what you get to do is to guide your heart through this world and offer blessings even so.

"Thank you for that, beautiful."

Someone else raised their hand on the far other side.

"I just really wanted to thank you very much for bringing me on this journey tonight. I felt like I went through a great deal of inner movement through the metta meditation and also the stories. I've definitely been struggling with some things, and it brought me back to a sense of peace. It really made me feel a lot of gratitude again. I just wanted to thank you."

"Thank you. What are you struggling with, in general? Family? The world?"

"No, just a real kind of existential angst."

"Okay, close your eyes for a moment. You made the mistake of raising your hand—now you're in trouble. And tell me, when you close your eyes and sort of tune in... because you're not the only one. There are a lot of people who have feelings of despair or existential dread or concern. Where do you feel it in your body?"

"Definitely my heart."

"Okay. What does it feel like in your heart?"

"Dense and heavy."

"Dense and heavy. So feel that and let it just be there—dense and heavy—and then wrap it with kindness. Say, 'Thank you for your concern.' You're not judging it. It's actually there because you care a lot. Say, 'Thank you, thank you for your concern. I appreciate that, thank you.' So you're holding it with appreciation and kindness, not trying to get rid of it. Notice what happens when you do this. Does your heart like it?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet. What does your heart say? That's fine. Okay, what does it say? 'Don't try to steamroll me with that love, baby'?"

"No, that's not it. It actually just was... I suddenly was feeling very exposed and vulnerable, and I didn't like it. And I found that when I was doing the metta and I was doing it with myself, that was the most effective thing."

"Beautiful, beautiful. And it's hard when we feel vulnerable. And it's also vulnerable for you to have the mic in front of the whole room of people. That's completely understandable."

I remember this cartoon from Feiffer. There's a woman standing there with her arms crossed across her chest, and there's a man kneeling on one knee with his arms outstretched. He says, "But I love you." And she says, "Don't you threaten me."

We laugh about it because it's familiar to us. We have all of that inside. So when we're vulnerable, that's also what we feel.

And so you want to hold that vulnerability with kindness and say, "I know we're vulnerable. It's all right."

Because I think that if you let yourself feel more deeply into the existential despair or concern or whatever it is, underneath it is tenderness and grief for the world. And it's very soft. And those are good tears. They're called the tears of the way. They're not just "you were abused"—they're tears because you care so much.

And I hear you as someone who actually cares a lot. And then it's very hard to bear sometimes, but you can. The neuroscience description is that our meditation practice expands the window of tolerance of our heart so that we can bear the depth of our tears and the magnificence of our joy and the humor of our follies—all of those things. And so you're learning that. And that's part of the human awakening in someone.

I love the passage at the end of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* where he's finally sitting by the river. You all read it in high school, right? And he hears all the voices in the river—the manly voice and the happy voice and the weeping voice, the childish voice

and the vulnerable voice—and he said, "Then I heard it differently, and I heard all of them together as a kind of harmony." It was the music of humanity, of being human, with all the tears and all the magnificence. And he said, "Finally I came to peace." Something like that.

Anyway, thank you for that beautiful question.

Maybe one more before we finish. We don't have to, but you know it's dangerous to raise your hand. But sometimes a brave soul...

Yes, the microphone is coming.

"My husband just said, 'Good luck.'"

Hold it close.

"I don't like that."

Yeah, exactly.

"I feel very vulnerable."

Stop first. Just feel that. Not a bad thing. It's very human. Hold it kindly—metta, compassion, vulnerable. It's just how we are as human beings, and kind of brave to stand up, and beautiful. So okay, you feel this. Now what?

"Well, it's embarrassing to admit how much anger I've been having about a situation that happened."

Is it in your family?

"No, it's ex-business partners. It's business related. It's money related. It's bank related."

Yes.

"And I keep mapping it onto what I'm watching on the news with people being dragged away by ICE and arrested and things like that."

And you want him to be dragged away?

"No. I do. No. I will admit it. I mean, it's terrible. Can I call ICE, by the way?"

I've got to give somebody for you to follow. In my worst moments—go ahead—I want revenge. You know, I do.

And so this has been really lovely, because as we sit in loving kindness... Ram Dass used to say, "All you can do for me is work on yourself, and all I can do for you is work on myself."

And I know that if I really take this into my heart and work on it, it's possible that I'll get to loving kindness and forgiveness and all of that. Where I'm struggling is—and I've said this to my husband—I feel like I will need to say the truth somewhere. Like I need to write a letter to various people and entities and say the truth about how unjust this is. And then I will be able to let go. And I don't know, maybe that's not true. I just don't know what to do with it.

All right, so first, be with the not knowing. Not knowing is not a bad place. It's actually a place where you learn things.

Okay.

Secondly, I don't know—is there anyone else in this room who has ever had thoughts of revenge? Don't bother raising your hands. We know.

I think it would be really interesting for you to write the letters. I'm not saying you should mail them, but take it a step at a time. Because in something you're saying, "I need to be witnessed in this. I need others to see this." Maybe you want them to see who you are, that you're the good person and he—or whatever that person, I assume it's a he, it could be a she—is the bad guy.

Yeah, that may be so. There are a lot of bad guys out there, by the way. If you want to write letters, I can give you a list. But this is your personal bad guy.

My bad guy, right.

So you write those letters and you look at them, and you feel into your heart. You say, "Do I need to send this? Is this really going to make things better?"

And there might be one that you really need to say. And then you look, and you ask two questions really. Is it true? Is it kind? Those are the principles of the Eightfold Path, of wise speech, right speech. Is it true? And is it kind? And you look and you say, well, it's kind of bitter, as a matter of fact. So maybe I'll rewrite it a little. I want to say this. And then you look: What's my intention?

So what you're doing is you're turning what you need to do—which is to release this from your heart—into a practice. It may be to send it, it may just be to write it, feel it, rewrite it a few times. Maybe you write it and then you do a ritual and you burn it and you say, "I'm just ready to let this go. I don't even want to think about this person except to wish them well, and we're done." There are all kinds of things you can do.

So it's really good that you bring it up, because you're not the only one in the room with that. And you can't hurry it. You can't kind of cover it over. "Okay, I'll forgive, you know. I still hate him, but I will forgive." It doesn't work that way.

Yeah.

How's this landing?

It's good. It's good. I want to hurry the not knowing what to do part. Like, I want to know—

And you want to know, do it—

And I want to, you know... because I want it settled.

Yes, you want it settled.

Yeah.

So, okay, pause for a moment. Just tell me, how hard is it to stay in the not knowing? Is it scary?

Oh, yeah. Is it?

Okay, so feel that. Hold it, wrap it with some kindness, because we all have that. Don't-know mind—you're staying with not knowing. Ajahn Chah used to say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" Can you get comfortable with uncertainty right now? It's unresolved. It's painful to feel it. Wrap it with kindness and say, "Yeah." Can you bear it? Can you?

"Yeah."

Because then it slows it down a little. Then you're not quite so desperate. How's that?

"That's good. It's not like I've never done that before. I've been in some pretty scary places not knowing."

So thank you. Thank you.

I shouldn't tell this story, but a very close friend of mine, a colleague and teacher, told me that her best friend, when they were living somewhere in the Midwest, was jilted by her boyfriend in a pretty painful and bad way. She was so upset. And then he was very pleased with himself because he had bought a fancy new pickup truck and lived some towns over. So in the middle of the night, she drove to where his truck was, threw a Molotov cocktail into it, and it burned. She drove away. No one saw it. Some days later, she got a message from her ex saying, "The weirdest thing happened—my truck burned." He never found out.

And I have to say, even though it was a bad and terrible thing that she did, there was a part of me that smiled about it and said, "Go girl." You know, we have all these parts. Let's be honest about it. You don't want to do it where you hurt somebody, and you don't want to do it where you hurt yourself. You're better than that, bigger than that, more loving than that. And I see that in your care, and I believe it. But it is fun to tell the story anyway, you've got to admit.

Okay though, so let's sit for a couple of minutes and return to metta, to the great heart of loving-kindness. As you breathe gently, you can hold your own complicated life with kindness, with compassion. And you can be a lighthouse, a lamp—"make of yourself a light," the Buddha's last words. Shine kindness. No matter—people are difficult, good, bad, everything in between. And in the middle of it all, you can rest in the great heart of kindness and love. Because it's who you really are. It's what we want for this world. And you become that. It alleviates your suffering and it tamps down the suffering of others. It's your gift.

So thank you for your kind attention, for the brave ones who raised their hand, for all of you. Thank you to the people who bought this book—my publisher will be really happy. And thank you for being part of Spirit Rock, online or in person. We need community these days, a lot.

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So I'm grateful. Go out into the evening, drive politely if you can, and we'll see you again.

And remember—you don't have to eat all the pea soup.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 56

Monday Night Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 44 min

> *In this Monday night gathering at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield reflects on over four decades of community practice and introduces a guided mettā (loving-kindness) meditation particularly suited for the challenges of modern life and family gatherings during Thanksgiving week. He shares the traditional origin story of mettā practice—how the Buddha taught it to frightened monastics in the forest—and notes its relevance for our contemporary 'jungle' of news and daily stressors.*
>
> *Kornfield offers the classical pedagogy of mettā: beginning with those easiest to love, then gradually expanding the circle to include neutral people, oneself, and eventually all beings. He emphasizes the importance of not using meditation as another opportunity for self-judgment, but rather holding all of our humanity—the difficult and beautiful alike—with compassion. The teaching includes the traditional list of benefits from practicing mettā, from sweeter dreams to improved health.*
>
> *The guided meditation moves through loved ones, allows them to reflect loving-kindness back to the practitioner, and expands outward to groups and all beings everywhere. A particularly moving dialogue follows, including one practitioner's testimony of transformation over fifty years of practice—from initially hating mettā and only being able to practice with her cat, to experiencing profound openness. This honest sharing illuminates how persistent, gentle practice can gradually soften even the most resistant heart.*

Good evening, what a pleasure.

It was very sweet arriving because I came about an hour ago and it was just finishing getting dark. There was a little bit of the moon and kind of not quite a black sky yet, still lit up a little bit. It's actually a beautiful night out there. It's cold—it's winter—but it's gorgeous. And you are too, so what to say. Thank you for being here.

This is now maybe the forty-first or forty-second year of the Monday night sitting group that we started. For a lot of years it was in the trailers that we had here in the meadow, and before that in the Fairfax Community Church. Some of you who are that old may even remember. The point of it has been to come together to remember what it's like to quiet our minds and tend the heart and be together in some sense of community doing so—and of course, having some teachings or conversation. All of those are important.

Spirit Rock has grown over these decades. It has so many programs of short and long retreats and trainings and practices, and has had thousands of people come through. When we look at the world—and there's actually a phrase, "the world," in the Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts, and it's not like "the world, whoopee!" It's like "the world... oh yeah, right." But at this time in the world, to have places of refuge and places where we steady the heart and quiet ourselves is really important and valuable as a reminder, as a support.

What we usually do on Monday night is meditation for a time, then take a break for five minutes to stretch, and then some teachings followed by dialogue or questions and response. Tonight is also the launch—I don't know what the right word is—the celebration for this new book that came out this last week. I was reading it after I got a copy. It's kind of fun to actually get it when it's finally printed, different than all the drafts and the electronic versions. I had been feeling ambivalent about it, thinking it was okay. And then I read it and thought, "Hey, I really like this. This is actually pretty good."

I got a call from the publisher, Sounds True Macmillan, saying I had done this beautiful course on great teaching stories, and would I like to write a book about that? I listened and said, "You know, I'm not really in the mood to write another book. I've got sixteen published books. I hardly have an unpublished thought. And I've got other things to do." They said, "Well, how about if we take those teachings and edit them into a book, and then you can add things and fix it up?" I said, "That's the kind of writing I like. Thank you." So they did, and they gave it to me, and I added a lot of things that I like or love. That's how it came about. I'll be reading and talking from that and other things about what I think is really helpful for us.

To start for tonight—I'm particularly aware that this is Thanksgiving week. I've been teaching an online course on forgiveness, and I had my class today. We talked about the forgiveness between the Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics, or the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or the Republicans and Democrats in the US. I asked, "So what does this teaching on forgiveness really touch for you?" People raised their hands electronically, and we had a conversation—and it was all about their families. Forget Ireland, forget Ukraine—"I'm going home, and I need some practices for that."

I reminded them that the Buddha and Jesus both had trouble when they went home, so they should expect that that's part of the game. Family is family. It's wonderful, it's family, and it's other things than that.

So tonight I want us, as we sit, to do a guided loving-kindness meditation. I'll talk about it a tiny bit and then we'll do it. The loving-kindness meditation as a practice was taught—as best we know, all these are kind of mythological stories as well that have

been passed down for a couple of thousand years and more. But apparently there was a group of ardent monks and nuns who were meditating with the Buddha, and they went out into the forests so they could practice ardently. At nighttime, they got frightened because there were sounds of wild animals and unknown things.

You know, that was the equivalent of watching the news today. It does the same thing to our nervous system. And so they came running back and said, "What do we do? It's dangerous. It's scary out there." And the Buddha said, "Let me give you a practice that will help you deal with the kind of fears that come." And that was the first occasion to teach loving-kindness meditation—so that when you go back into the jungle, or watch the news, or whatever wild thing you do, you have that as a basis to tend and care for your own heart.

Now, one of the things that's cool about it, and you'll see as we go through the pedagogy, is that you start where it's easy. You don't do loving-kindness meditation and decide, "Okay, I'm going to start with whoever you consider the bad guys." I'm using that particular gender on purpose—there are a bunch of them, you may have noticed. But you don't start there. You actually start where it's most natural and loving and easy, and you soften the heart, and you open it, and you do a few more. Then you go to people that are a little bigger than just the close ones to you, and you wish them well—happiness and safety and so forth. And eventually, if you go through the progression over time, traditionally you go through neutral people. Neutral people are the ones you kind of notice—that person at the checkout place at your grocery store where you go regularly, or at the post office, someplace where you see people but don't really have much thought about them. And then you expand from that to mildly difficult people. Do any of you have mildly difficult people? Don't raise your hands. And then you go on from there.

The neutral people practice is actually kind of interesting. I was doing a retreat on my own of metta at Santa Sabina in San Rafael a couple of decades ago or more, and I was practicing metta, going through it systematically. I thought, "Okay, who's going to be my neutral person?" There was a gardener there, this guy who I would see periodically coming and trimming and cutting, and I'd nod to him. I was being quiet. So I spent a day wishing him well as part of my long metta retreat. Safe, protected, happy—that was my practice. Of course, it made me happy. And then I carried on.

About two days later, I went downstairs and out toward the garden. Around the corner came this guy, and I looked up and said, "Oh, my neutral person—I love you!" It just changed the whole valence of my care, because I had invited him in, in a regular way, into my heart and realized, oh, we're in relation to one another.

Now this is a non-sequitur, but I'm going to say it anyway. Two days ago I did a daylong teaching here on inner technology for outer technology. Some of it was with designers and people who are creating outer technology, and some of it was just people talking about how they use technology or how their kids use it. A lot of it to start with, beside training the inner technology of calm and steadiness and clarity, was recognizing that we're in relationship to technology—that it's actually a relationship and we're embedded in it. We are, you know.

And you'll notice behind me this beautiful Chinese Kuan Yin. Usually she's depicted in the thangkas with hundreds or thousands of arms serving, and eyes to see the whole world, reaching out all these hands. Now she's just—no, she can do it online. She's checking, trying to stay connected to everybody.

Anyhow, it's said when you do metta, loving-kindness practice, that there are many blessings that come as your heart trains itself to be open and kind and loving. There's a list of forty—you know, the Buddha was a list maker. Your dreams become sweet. You fall asleep more easily. I mean, that's enough already, right? You waken contented. Your thoughts are pleasant as you cultivate loving-kindness. Your health improves. Angels and devas will love and protect you, even if you don't believe in them. Animals will sense your love and not harm you.

I think that was part of the Buddhist teaching for those monks and nuns. People will welcome you everywhere. Your babies will be happy in the womb and growing up. If you pass by an elephant, it will nod and bow and honor your loving kindness. You can go to the zoo and try it out. If you lose things, they will be returned to you. If you fall off a cliff, a tree will always be there to catch you. And the world will be more peaceful and loving around you.

So those are some of the forty benefits. This reflects what you might find in a monastery in Burma or Thailand, where they actually do this little recitation. Okay, now I'm motivated. I'm waiting for the elephant. I'm going to do it.

So let's do a bit of practice together. But one more thing first.

There is one basic instruction for all the kinds of meditation—and there are many, many kinds—that you do, and that is not to use it to judge yourself. "Oh, I'm no good at this metta, loving kindness. I must be a bad person. I can't do it." You know how it is, your unworthiness. It's actually kind of boring, but we won't go there for a moment. Honestly, come on, you're bigger than that.

But anyway, you don't want to use this with some ideal. It might be that your attention wanders. It might be that you hate it. And the dance in meditation isn't trying to fix that, but to get curious. "Hmm, I wonder why so much hatred is arising when I'm trying to do metta." Well, maybe I'm really pissed at that person. Which can happen.

I mean, one morning I was leading a retreat years ago, and it was my time to go in—I was scheduled to lead the loving kindness meditation—and I'd had a bad fight with my wife at the time, my ex. She said a bunch of things that were really wrong, we'll say, bad. And I was sitting there kind of steaming. But it was my job to say, "All right, now think of someone you care about and send them some thoughts. May you be safe and well." And I'd be quiet, thinking, "I'm going to call her. I'm going to talk to her and straighten this out." Okay, now think of someone else you love.

And it was so interesting because the mind has no pride. It will do anything. And so the practice is to hold all of that in kindness, to hold your humanity—the tainted glory of your humanity—all of it in loving kindness. All the difficult and beautiful and amazing and horrifying parts that you all have, that we have as humans.

Okay. Sit comfortably. It's very hard to do metta if your knees are killing you.

With metta there are meditations on gratitude and thanks, forgiveness. But here we'll start really simply.

Let your body be settled and at ease and in a comfortable posture. Notice how it's breathing itself, and invite a kind of calm and gentleness to simply hold this breathing body kindly. Notice the stillness, the invitation for things to settle down. Even if there's repeated thoughts or emotions, let them rise and fall like the waves of the ocean. And around them is just a kindness, a field of loving awareness that notices it all without judging, without trying to change—just a loving presence for all of your humanity.

And now let yourself think of, remember, picture in your mind's eye, someone who you have a natural feeling of love or kindness for. Some person or being where it's not conflicted. Basically, there's a natural caring. It could be a child, a friend.

It could even be your dog—you know, you come home and it wags its tail. It doesn't judge you.

Picture this being. And first of all, with this child, this person, simply gaze at them with your mind's eye and feel your natural caring. It's there.

Then in your own way, begin to wish them well. There are some traditional phrases I'll use, but you can modify them in whatever way feels right to your heart.

Can you picture this being?

May you be safe and protected.
May you be well in body and mind.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you be filled with loving-kindness.
May you hold your struggles in compassion.

Every being has their measure of struggles.

May you be peaceful and happy inwardly.

You can repeat it again with whatever language you choose as you gaze at them. *May you be safe, protected.* You want this for them. *May you be well and healthy. May you be filled with loving-kindness, held in it. May your struggles be held in compassion. May your heart be peaceful.*

Now bring into the heart and mind another person that you care about—again, where it's easy and natural, not terribly conflicted. Picture them, remember them, think of them. Let the loving-kindness open to include them in this field of care.

You gaze at them: *May you too be safe and protected. May you be healthy and well. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles with compassion—all your struggles, so kindly. May your heart be peaceful and happy, truly happy.*

Notice what it feels like to begin this well-wishing to beings you care about.

Now imagine these two standing across from you, gazing back at you. They look at you with kindly eyes and they say, "Just as you wish this well-being and love for us, we want to wish it for you. We want to return it." Because they also care.

Imagine or sense that they're looking at you kindly and saying: *May you too be safe and protected.* They want this for you. *May you be healthy and well. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles with compassion.* They're gazing at you. *Hold your struggles with compassion, with kindness. And may your heart be peaceful and happy.*

Take in their good wishes. If you're comfortable, put a hand on your heart. They're teaching you.

As they gaze kindly, you accept this and you say—it's hard—*May I be safe and protected,* just as they want for you. *May I be safe and protected.* They wish this for you. *May I be well and healthy, strong.* May it be so. Like you're blessing yourself, and they're with you. *May I be filled with kindness toward myself and the whole world. May I hold my struggles in compassion.*

You know what they are. Hold them all kindly.

And may my heart be peaceful and happy.

Let it sink in, this well-wishing, just as you wish this for these loved ones and friends. They gaze at you and say: you too, held in the field of loving-kindness.

Now expand it. Open the heart further and picture another person you want to add—someone you feel called to wish well. Again, not a tough one, but a natural one.

May you be safe and protected. May you be well and strong. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles in compassion, great compassion. May your heart be peaceful and happy.

And now expand it further. Think of a group of people. It could be family coming to Thanksgiving dinner, or friends, or co-workers—some group that you know. There they are, arising in your mind's eye, in your heart. You surround them with loving-kindness. Even though they're a mixed bag of humanity, your loving-kindness is way bigger, and you wish them well.

May you be safe and protected. May you be healthy and well. May you all be filled with kindness—remember and dwell and live in kindness. May you hold your struggles in compassion. And may your hearts be peaceful and happy.

Let the field of loving-kindness that's growing in you now extend, shine out like a lighthouse in all directions—in front of you and behind, to left and right, above and below. Wish beings in every direction on this land well: all the animals, the badgers and worms and mountain lions and crows. May all the beings of this place be happy and protected.

Then out across the land, across the valleys and waters—beings in the cities, beings in the countryside. The light of loving-kindness shines in every direction.

May all beings everywhere, far and near, young and old—may you all be safe and protected. May you be well and healthy, all beings, omitting none. May you all be filled with kindness. May you feel compassion for your struggles. Hold them in compassion. And may your hearts be at peace, whoever you are, wherever you are, beings of every kind. May your hearts be at peace and find true happiness.

You become the lighthouse of loving-kindness, illuminating all directions with care.

Staying with this quality of loving-kindness, allow your eyes to open and look around at the beings sitting near you. Catch their eye, check them out, and continue to wish them well, each one. May you be safe. May you be protected. May you be strong and healed. May you be filled with kindness, each of you. Look around, wish them well—you can do it. I know it's a little unusual, but you can do it. It's not really that hard.

May you hold your struggles in compassion. Anybody in this room not have struggles? Raise your hand. Okay, we've established that. Hold them with kindness, every one of you. And may your hearts be at peace—you and you and you and you. May your hearts be at peace. What a beautiful thing to wish.

Be at peace. Be happy. Wow—be happy. It's okay. And as Guillaume Apollinaire said, sometimes it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.

So we're going to take a pause for a moment of a different kind, and I want to ask you how that was. Any observations or reports or comments, just for a little bit before we take our break. How was that? Was it hard?

Pedagogically, the reason I started with other people is because most folks find it very hard to do loving-kindness for themselves. It feels squirmy, and "I don't deserve it" and all that kind of stuff comes up. So you picture people you care about, and then they look at you and say, "Yeah, you too—you get in the circle as well."

Someone in the back asked if I could explain a little further about having compassion for your struggles. What makes you ask?

"Sitting here listening to the meditation, my mind kept going, 'How do I have compassion for a struggle?' and I missed the next thing you were saying. I kind of got stuck on that, if I'm honest."

What are the kinds of things you struggle with? Is it family, or friends, or politics? Where's your struggle?

"I think it's all of the above."

All of the above. Okay, check box two, three, four. So one of the things about struggle—thank you for that, this is good—is that it's very easy to judge yourself. "I'm struggling with the conflicts in my family, or the political climate, or the way people are behaving at work." That's part of being human, that we find our way into struggle. There are different ways you can hold it. One is to judge yourself, or just get in it and be right. And then you notice how that works for you. When you live in that—you're shaking your head—like maybe that's not where you want to live.

So instead, you realize: okay, this is being human, to have struggle in family and community and close people and work. Let me be kind and compassionate. Everybody's having to deal with their human life, and they don't always do it very beautifully or graciously. Sometimes they make a mess of it, or they're hard for us. And instead of a lot of judgment, you say, "Ah, let me just hold this with kindness, compassion." That's a beginning of an answer. How does that land?

Someone else shared: "It's been fifty years, and I have to say I am just amazed—because fifty years ago I could not stand to do loving-kindness. I just hated it. It was incredibly, incredibly difficult."

Magnificent.

This is wonderful. You hated it. I love it. Keep going.

And I am just so amazed. It is the best loving-kindness practice I have ever had, and it's just completely different. So I just want to say: persist. I had to start out with my cat, because I could not stand to do it for anyone else. I certainly could not stand to do it for myself. But I could feel it from my cat. And it's just so different here, fifty years later. Little by little, it's changed. And I don't think I actually realized it until tonight.

A testimonial. We love it. We are all your cats now, really. And it says something—that's why it's called practice rather than perfect.

I'm just so amazed and so grateful. I truly appreciate it.

Thank you. Thank you so much. And thank you both for these comments and questions, because they're important.

CHAPTER 57

Solstice

Jack Kornfield · 1h34

> *In this winter solstice gathering, Jack Kornfield guides practitioners through a 25-minute meditation focused on breath awareness and loving presence, inviting us to take our seat at "the still point of the turning world." The meditation emphasizes gentle acknowledgment of thoughts and emotions as waves rising and falling, cultivating what Thích Nhất Hạnh calls calm and ease within the breathing body.*
>
> *Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's teachings on impermanence and the Dhammapada's verses on living in joy, Kornfield reflects on the solstice as an invitation to pause amidst life's ten thousand joys and sorrows. He explores the brahmavihāras—the divine abodes of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity—describing how gazing meditation can awaken these qualities and help us see others in a timeless way. The talk weaves together Buddhist wisdom with poetry from Crowfoot elders, T.S. Eliot, and Walt Whitman, alongside stories of ordinary acts of extraordinary generosity.*
>
> *Kornfield reminds us that meditation has two purposes: to quiet the mind and tend the heart, then to add our gifts to this troubled and magnificent world. Through touching stories—a family helped on Christmas morning, a daughter choosing compassion over caution, a small act of recognition transforming a hospital worker—he illustrates how each of us can be the snowflake that tips the branch toward peace. The teaching concludes with an invitation to recognize the light we carry and share it in the minute particulars of our daily lives.*

So here we are, mid-December, not many days before the winter solstice.

One of the beautiful things about living in Marin County where Spirit Rock is located is that there's a group of people who, now for many years, do a trek around Mount Tamalpais—the central mountain in the middle of Marin County, about 2,600 feet. In the morning of the solstice, starting in the dark, they carry candles and sometimes sing and chant. It's as if they bring their voices together with the turning, the music of the spheres.

I remember years ago going to the top of Mount Tamalpais one day when I learned there was a passage of the planet Venus across the face of the sun. I got up there and a number of people had set up their telescopes, some of them quite big. I got to look in

the eyepiece of one of the biggest telescopes, and there was the orange-red, roiling, round disk of the face of the sun. It's not at all static when you look closely—it's like all these little wiggly lines of fire and energy moving. It's really quite extraordinary.

On one side of this big orange disk was a little round black pebble that was blocking out the light, pebble-sized as it moved over the course of a few hours across the face of the sun. What was amazing to see, for me anyway, was to feel that here we are on planet Earth, which is about the same size as Venus, and we too are circling our star. You could feel it—this huge star, and then lots of space, and then this tiny black circle going across the sun. If someone were on Mars, they might see the tiny black circle of the Earth sometimes going across the face of the sun. We're in this cosmic dance, the music of the spheres.

So now the time of solstice has come for us. The beautiful thing about solstice is that it invites us to stop, to pause—like a sacred pause—to take a breath. Because the meaning of solstice (sol is sun) is that the sun stands still for a moment. And we get to stand still. When we do stand still, we can see in a new and different way.

I want to read a tiny poem from Crowfoot, one of the Blackfoot Nation elders:

What is life?
It is the flash of a firefly in the night.
It is the breath of a buffalo in wintertime.
It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in sunset.

Disappear in the flash of the firefly. This is us. We feel very permanent to ourselves, but actually it's all this amazing, ever-changing dance.

What you get to do, and what we get to do together now, is some meditation—to take our seat at what the poet T.S. Eliot called the still point of the turning worlds.

So settle yourself. We'll sit for twenty-five minutes or so. Find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease. Let yourself sink down into this seat or the chair or wherever you are. Feel the solidity beneath your seat that goes all the way down to the center of the earth. You're held by Mother Earth as you take your seat—your seat at the still point in the middle of all the turning.

Let your eyes close gently. Take two or three long breaths. Let things relax as you do. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Maybe let your head move in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax,

and let arms and hands rest easily. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, bring your mindful loving awareness to feel and sense and notice how your body is breathing itself just now. No need to change or alter anything, just to kindly notice. As you relax, you'll become aware that you are being breathed—that the earth is breathing you, your body and the ocean of air in a dance together.

Relax with it. Soften. Let each breath come and go as it will, feeling the rhythm of life moving through your body.

This breath, if you're in North America, came across the Pacific Ocean. It dusted the tops of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa in Hawaii. It dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor in Japan. It moved across the waves of the ocean, the sea of air, and now comes into your own lungs and body, gently and graciously. Receive it with kindness.

Thich Nhat Hanh recommends adding a soft whisper of a word as you breathe. Calm. Or ease. In the background, very softly—ease or calm—as the breath breathes itself. Let the awareness of the breath be an invitation for the whole body, heart, and mind to quiet, to calm, to settle.

You might feel the movement of breath as coolness in the nostrils, the air coming in and out, or on the upper lip. Perhaps you'll feel it as the rise and fall of chest or belly. Let it breathe itself. And if you have any difficulty sensing the breath—if it's soft, hard to feel, or there's too much else going on—take one hand and put it on your belly and feel the belly rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you sense the breath, naturally after a bit of time, the attention will wander. It might be a breath or two later or six breaths later—no matter. You can notice where it's wandered very gently. Let the thoughts or plans or memories or sensations, the images, the emotions, whatever pulls you from the breath, let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Notice if you've been carried off by a thought or an emotion. If you like, you can whisper gently: thinking, remembering, planning. Or sadness, excitement, love, fear.

When you notice the thought or the feeling, let it go, sink back like the waves of the ocean. Just acknowledge gently—oh yes, sadness or excitement or planning—and come back to the next breath. Rest your loving awareness with the sensations of the breath or the rise and fall in the palm of your hand. Let things quiet, steady.

When you notice that a wave has arisen around the breath and pulls the attention away, acknowledge it kindly with loving awareness. Remembering. Planning. Thinking. Worrying. Delighting. Let that simple acknowledgement be enough. Let that experience, like the waves of the ocean, dissolve. Return back for a few more breaths, training the mind and heart and breath to be together, breath by breath.

Thich Nhat Hanh recommends putting a half smile on your lips. Notice the breathing body with loving awareness—this breath and this one—kindly, with ease, a steady and calm presence, returning over and over to the breath very gently. Each time a wave arises and carries the attention, name it gently. If it feels really strong—a strong pain, a great moment of sadness or elation or delighting or fear, a compelling plan—you can stay with it for a little bit. Name it gently. Planning. You can say thank you. What a beautiful plan. Thank you. Celebration—something good has happened. Let yourself feel it with loving awareness, and then let it go.

You become the silent loving witness to the breath, the breath of life, and this helps you to quiet the mind and tend the heart. You become the loving witness of the waves of human experience. Imagination and judgment, connection, all the emotions, ideas—they rise and fall like waves. And you are the still point. The silent center. You are the loving awareness itself, noticing it all, kindly. This breath.

This moment.

It doesn't matter how long the attention wanders or drifts. The beautiful thing is the moment that you reawaken and say, "Oh yes, here we are, this timeless moment." And the loving awareness acknowledges just this, just now. The spacious awareness of the breath and the world itself rising and passing away. And you are silent and loving in the middle of it all.

The still point. Silent, loving awareness. Just here.

The still point of the turning world. It's a refreshing thing to do, to sit with a mindful, loving presence as the breath breathes itself and the waves of experience arise and pass. It puts us more in harmony with the real rhythms of life.

It's a pleasure to come and sit together as we did. Monday Night Sitting Group is now in its forty-first year—forty-one years of teaching this, starting in someone's living room in San Anselmo and in the Fairfax Community Church, and then for a long time, thirty-

five years, on the land at Spirit Rock. To be able to come together and not do anything is an extraordinary thing in our culture and our time. You have to admit, we get so busy. There's so many things and so much input and so much to tend to.

And then the solstice comes. The mystery of the solstice—the sun standing still for a moment, as it was believed, changing course and coming back. It's a timeless pause, a sacred pause really. In the Northern hemisphere for us, it's the pause in the darkness, in the fertile darkness from which everything comes.

We live in a culture that's in many ways characterized by the absence of the sacred. Christmas is primarily about shopping, among other things, and family—beautiful things—but not much about sacred silence and mystery. The question is, how do we hold this human life that we've been given, especially without the sacred rituals of old? The fact that we can come together and sit in silence is already a beautiful thing. Listen to the body and the heart and the world.

And it's not easy. From the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddhist words: "It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not." This is the uncertainty of samsara, of existence. All things are impermanent. These were among the last words of the Buddha: awaken to this.

When we sit still, we also feel how much we carry of the movement and the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows. For now, there have been mass shootings and the tremendous grief and inhumanity of them. The anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-immigrant sentiment. The continuing warfare and divisiveness and growing dictatorships.

In some way, many of us are touched more by the shootings—the school shootings and that kind of violence—than we are by the tens of thousands of people who have died or are under siege in Sudan, or the Rohingya who fled the horrible treatment in Burma. There's something about it being more immediate and small and understandable. And it's heartbreaking to carry all this. It's part of being human. Birth and death. Joy and sorrow. Gain and loss. Fame and disrepute.

And while on one side there are the wars and the shootings and the divisiveness, today on this earth there are 249,762 new babies born. They came out saying, "Look, I'm here! I'm with you." Every day, a quarter of a million new people saying, "Hey, count me in."

I don't know how it happens. I mean, I do know.

Their mothers carry them and give birth to them. That's an astonishing, weird, amazing thing—that we grow in the body of another person, our mother, and then we come out and say, "I'm here. Let me have a life."

And so there's all the suffering, and there's also the unbearable beauty of it. Of a single tree. Or a flower. Or the field of lilies. Or the beauty of a sunset.

I was reading this poem by an Inuit poet living up past the Arctic Circle, and he was celebrating the magic of sunrise, the amazing thing when the sun rises. And then I realized—oh, he's talking about the fact that he hasn't seen the sun for three or four months and now it's coming back. This is a really amazing thing. It's returned. But he says, what a magical thing for the sun to rise and fill the world with light every single day, and fill the world with 250,000 new babies.

So here we are in this mystery. How do we hold it? What do we do with it?

For many years—for more than fifty years—I worked together with a very dear heart friend and colleague, Stanislav Grof, who was the last legitimate LSD researcher in the late 1960s and early seventies at Johns Hopkins University, before it was all shut down. He'd come from Prague. And then after LSD was made illegal, teaching together with Stan and all these other people who were still very interested in the transformation of consciousness that psychedelics could offer, he developed with his wife Christina a very deep holotropic breathwork process. People would breathe in this intense way with music, and it would open them very much like psychedelics.

Of course, we'd been working together a long time, and I was quite tuned to it because I'd been in a Burmese monastery of Sunlun Sayadaw, where we would sit several times a day for an hour or an hour and a half without moving. And the first forty-five minutes of it was to breathe as hard and fast as you could. The Sayadaw, the teacher there, said, "The modern world is too distracted. We need something to really help you find your attention." Close your eyes, and he would ring this huge gong at the end of the room. Then, kind of like a coach, he'd say, "All right, now get to it, start breathing." Periodically he would encourage: "Breathe harder, breathe faster"—for forty-five minutes. Then he would ring the gong and everything would get silent. And he'd say, "Stay in that silent openness and notice what wants to open for the next forty-five minutes." We'd do that two or three times a day. It was quite wild.

So we did the same in holotropic breathwork, and Stan added this whole sequence of driving and compelling music that would start soft and then have a beat to help people breathe. If you walked into the room—we often worked in groups of two or three hundred people, and they would be paired up, someone lying there breathing while the

other person sat with them, tending to anything they needed: a glass of water, a blanket, being held, whatever—you'd walk into the room with a few hundred people breathing to this loud, amazing, shamanic kind of music. It was a little like going into Dante's Divine Comedy.

There would be thirty people in the middle of getting born, some birth process coming out, or being the mother giving birth to them. And there'd be twenty people over there who were dying in different ways—some with memories of having been in battles in past lives, or dying old, or dying young, or remembering being with someone else who died and feeling that whole process. And some of them were in bliss, just in these divine heaven realms, beatific smiles radiating light. And some of them were struggling like they were in Dante's lower realms of pain and suffering, reliving trauma. It was all there.

And the amazing thing is, it's all in here. We carry all of this. As Whitman says, we are larger than we think, because you are the universe—it's all inside you, all of that. "We contain multitudes," he said.

One of my favorite group meditation practices—something I'll do at a retreat like the Ram Dass retreat or others I've done for years—is to have people pair off and look in each other's eyes. Particularly to evoke the divine abodes of the Buddhist teachings, the four immeasurables or the Brahmaviharas of the awakened heart: love and compassion, joy and peace.

People gaze at each other for ten, fifteen minutes, and they fall in love with each other. They see the beauty behind the eyes, and this great love comes. They see the measure of sorrows that everyone carries, the struggles in every life, and great compassion awakens as they gaze. Joy, the child of the spirit.

And then finally, in the section of peace and equanimity, the awakened heart, they're now invited to gaze even more deeply, in a timeless way, and to see that at another time and another place, the person across from you has been your mother or father or your child—your son or your daughter—or your teacher, or your student.

And they continue to gaze. The Tibetans say that every being you meet—there have been so many countless lifetimes—every being you meet has been your mother at some other time. But here, gazing, you really see it.

What it would have been like to have that person be your mother, or father, or daughter, or son, teacher, or student. And then one of the wild ones: at some other time and place, they were your friend, and you feel this warmth of heart. And then you look

deeper, and in another time and place, they were your enemy. And it's amazing how in just a few seconds, the gaze changes and you see how they could be your enemy. Because we are large and we contain multitudes. We contain so much. All of it possible.

And when you see in this way, you start to see in a timeless way, just as we did when we took that seat, the still point in the middle of all life. When you can really gaze at another, or gaze at this mystery of the little planets going around our fiery star, and we're the little bugs on this planet—there's this tiny little planet across the face of the sun and it has all these little bugs on it. That's us. Bugs are us.

When we see in this timeless way, we see life. We see each person, the ones in our gaze, in our eyes. What opens is mercy, tenderness, love. Because then what matters? Here we are in this human incarnation. We get quiet. The world is turning. The spheres, the music of the spheres, are dancing. And our life, as the Buddha said—did we think that it was permanent? It's dancing too. We have a beginning and changes and changes, evolution of our own physical body and heart and mind. And then this particular dance ends, and you'll see—you'll be surprised or not when you float out of your body. Wow, that was an amazing incarnation, wasn't it? Wow.

But then what matters? What opens is tenderness, compassion, love, mercy.

I remember teaching with Stephen Levine, wonderful dear friend, colleague, meditation teacher. He worked a lot with people who were in hospice or dying or attending the dying. And one of the questions he would come to as the retreat went on—he would have people practice, say, "Imagine this is your last day. You have one more day on this earth in this incarnation." And after people had a few moments to imagine that, he would say, "Who would you call? What would you say?" And then: "Why are you waiting?"

It was that third question that was the killer, right? Who would you call? And why are you waiting? Why are you waiting to speak from that place of tenderness and love and mercy—or whatever matters?

William Blake said that if we are to do good on this earth, in this human life, it must be done in the minute particulars, in the immediate particulars. General good, he went on, is the plea of the flatterer, the scoundrel, and the liar. The minute particulars.

So here it is. This is from Mark Morford's commentary. He says: "Stop thinking our global crisis is all there is. Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and shooting and environmental disaster, there are a thousand counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty, all happening all over the world right now on a breathtaking scale. From flower box to cathedral, resist the

temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel. Realize that this is the perfect moment to re-envision the enchantment of the world, to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume right when it seems dark, bitter, offensive, acrimonious, conflicted, bilious. There's your opening right here. Remember mystery. Believe in the seeds that you plant."

As Thoreau said, "I am prepared to expect miracles." Let the seeds be part of a groundswell of resistance, each a seemingly small but actually very, very large and important karmic shift that's happening.

The beginning of something new and potent and unstoppable.

Here's an old story for you, because it is the solstice and the holiday time.

A light drizzle was falling as my sister Jill and I ran out of the Methodist church. This was Christmas morning in 1951. Across the street from the church was a Pan Am gas station where the Greyhound bus stopped. It was closed for Christmas, and I noticed a family standing outside there.

Once we got home, there was barely time to enjoy our presents. We had to go off to our grandparents'. And as we piled back in the car with our presents, my father began to drive more slowly. He noticed the family that was still sitting there outside the closed gas station in the cold. The closer we got, the slower the car went. Suddenly my father pulled over and said, "I can't stand it."

"What?" asked my mother.

"It's that family back there at Pan Am, standing in the rain and the snow. They've got children. It's Christmas."

When my father pulled over into the service station, I saw that there were five of them. Parents, three children—two girls and a small boy. My father rolled down his window. "Merry Christmas," he said.

"Howdy," the man replied. He was tall and had to stoop slightly to peer into the car. Jill, Sharon, and I stared at the three children outside.

"Waiting on the bus?" my father asked, as the children stared back.

The man said they were going to Birmingham, where he had a brother and prospects of a job.

"Well, that bus isn't going to come along for some hours, and you're getting wet standing here. Windburn's just a couple miles up the road. They've got a shed with a cover there, some benches," my father said. "Why don't you all get in the car and I'll run you up there?"

The man thought about it for a moment, then beckoned to his family. They climbed in the car. No luggage, only the clothes they were wearing. Once they were settled in, my father looked back over his shoulder and asked the children if Santa had found them yet. Three glum faces.

"I think so," said my father, winking at my mother. "Because when I saw Santa this morning, he told me he was having trouble finding y'all and asked me if he could leave your toys at our house. We'll go get them before I take you to the bus stop."

When we got out of the car at our house, the three children ran through the front door straight to the toys that were spread out under our Christmas tree. One of the girls spied Jill's doll and immediately hugged it to her breast. Another girl picked up something of mine. All this happened a long time ago, but the memory of it remains clear. This was the Christmas when my sisters and I learned the joy of making others happy.

My mother noticed that the middle child was wearing a short-sleeved dress, so she gave the girl Jill's only sweater to wear. My father invited them to join us at grandparents' for Christmas dinner, but the parents refused.

Back in the car on the way to Windburn, my father asked the man if he had money for the bus fare. His brother had sent the ticket, the man said. My dad reached into his pocket and pulled out five dollars, which was all he had left until his next payday. He pressed the money into the man's hand. The man tried to give it back, but my father insisted. "It'll be late when you get to Birmingham, and these children will be hungry before then. Take it. I've been broke before. I know what it's like when you can't feed your family."

We left them there at the bus stop in Windburn. And as we drove away, I watched out the window as long as I could, looking back at the little girl hugging her new doll.

This is what we remember, you know, in the Buddhist teachings about the end of life.

One of the beautiful teachings is to say that as you approach your death, as you approach the end of your life, think back and bring into the heart and mind a few things, a few moments of goodness that you participated in. It doesn't have to be Mother Teresa building a nonprofit and saving thousands of lives. A few moments of goodness that gladden the heart—it makes such a difference to do so.

And here we are, the solstice coming, and there are thousands of acts of staggering generosity all day long. Mothers putting their tortillas and rice gruel and croissant or whatever it happens to be, the millet, in the bowls of their children. People helping one another who are having trouble walking or opening a door or crossing the street.

The solstice invites us to see with the eyes of wonder. And things keep getting reborn. Every day, there are a hundred billion new blood cells born in your body. Two million blood cells in a second. I say that sentence and you've got ten million new blood cells. How does that happen? They're busy replicating and making new cells. It's extraordinary. And you get half a million new skin cells every hour, so that when you reach over and kiss someone's cheek, you leave a few skin cells, you take some, they drop on the floor. It's okay, your body says, here's another half million in the next hour.

I remember going to where there'd been a big forest fire in Point Reyes National Park and being shocked two years later—because it's an area where there's rain, so it's not slow like a desert to rebuild itself—and there were bushes and trees already. It was like filling itself up. Life does not want to stop.

And I remember being in the hospital with my twin brother when he was dying of blood cancer. He was in this great giant hospital, and about every twenty or thirty minutes, there would be this beautiful chime that came over the loudspeaker. A nurse came in and I said, "What's that chime?" And she said, "Oh, a baby's been born."

It's so amazing what we are and how we sit. The eyes of wonder, astonishing. And the solstice says, yes, here we are. Let's just stop and listen. And then the heart can't do anything but tenderness and mercy when we really listen. We light our candles to remember, to join in, to carry our inner beauty and join it with the light of the heart of the world, of so many beings. So many staggering acts of generosity.

One more story, another tearjerker—forgive me. My daughter was telling me about how she was hanging out downtown with a friend this weekend when a very visibly pregnant woman with a thirteen-month-old toddler in a stroller approached her. The woman needed money for a hotel room. It was nighttime and she and her baby were cold. A stranger had given them a blanket but didn't want to give her the ninety dollars she needed for a hotel room in case it was a scam. So my daughter sent her seventy dollars by an app on the spot, and her friend gave her all the cash he had in his wallet. She had more than ninety.

When I asked her about it, my daughter told me she would rather be the kind of person who got scammed out of seventy dollars than the kind of person who didn't help a mama and her baby sleep in a warm place. That's what you carry. That's who you really are. That's what was born in you—the great heart of compassion and tenderness.

So the goal: to see this world with mercy, with tenderness, to see it with the eyes of wonder.

Sharon Salzberg, beloved loving-kindness teacher, colleague, friend for fifty years—when she was in India, because she'd suffered tremendously, she really had a background of great trauma, and she had an ability to take that and turn it and go very deep. She became a really profound meditator in a year or two with her teacher. And one day, this was maybe 1971, somebody gave her a copy of the new book at the time called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. And she looked at it, a Zen book, Beginner's Mind—she said, "I'm not a beginner," and tossed it aside, so she says. And then a little while later, some days later, she picked it up, thumbed through it, and she read the beginning, the astonishing, beautiful words of Suzuki Roshi: that the goal of meditation is always to keep your beginner's mind, to see with eyes of mindful, loving awareness.

And when we sit together in that stillness, it's as if it invites in us the birth of the child of the spirit—to quiet the mind, to tend the heart. That's meditation. Mystery, quiet, tend, open.

And then what? You know, in Zen, there are only two things. You sit and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. This is what we're here for. We sit and quiet the mind and open the heart. And then we add our gifts. We add our light. We add our heart, our understanding to this troubled and magnificent and amazing and beautiful world.

The great explorer Wade Davis explained, despair is a failure of imagination. And so when you tend the garden, it doesn't have to be grand. It doesn't have to be the great nonprofit, the Mother Teresa sleeping on the streets with the dying homeless in Calcutta. As she started, you can start small. You get quiet and you ask yourself, what wants to be born? What can I touch in the fabric of the world with the light of my own heart and mercy? Where can I mend a little bit of that fabric? My words, my care, my energy, my gifts, my resources.

Here's a story. You may have heard it, but it's worthy for the time of the approaching solstice.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a tiny mouse asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," came the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the tiny mouse replied. "I sat on a branch of a fir tree close to its trunk when it began to snow. Not a blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without a sound, without any violence, and having nothing better to do"—and you've all been in those quiet snowstorms—"I decided to count the snowflakes settling on the twigs of my branch. And the number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you would say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the mouse went away. And the dove, an authority on spiritual matters since the time of Noah, thought about this to herself and said, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in this world."

You have gifts. You have a light that you carry. You can see it in others. You want to protect it. You want to share it. And when you do, you become a bodhisattva—not in some grand "sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all" kind of way, but the bodhisattva who turns her heart to compassion, to care for all she encounters. Even if the sun should arise in the West, the bodhisattva has only one way. No matter what happens, this is the light of your heart. This is what you're here for—to add your gifts and your light to yourself too. You know how that goes.

And remember the instructions from the Buddha, from the verses in the Dhammapada, some of the most beloved verses repeated for 2,600 years again and again: Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate. Live in joy, in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, be still, free from fears and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way, the Dharma, bringing that joy into the world.

Solstice—a great invitation. Take your time. Time stops. It's timeless. It says, listen. What really matters? Who would you call? What would you say? Why are you waiting?

It was so great. Stephen would just get everybody to stop for a moment and go, "Oh, yeah." So beautiful. And you are that. You are that. That's what's born in you, and you get to give it. That's what you're here for.

And so the great Christian theologian and mystic Howard Thurman says: "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas year round begins. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the peoples, and to make music in the heart."

So let's sit for a few moments. Just notice, rest.

All right, dear ones. We have a bit of time for dialogue—questions, reports, descriptions of what's happening. You can raise your hand. *Sobat* is what the Sufis call it, which is a conversation of the heart.

"Hi, Jack."

"Hi, Susie."

"It's been many, many years that we've been sitting on Monday nights."

"Yes, many, many years."

"And I left Marin and here I am in San Diego. That was many years ago. I wrote my first book of fiction, and one of the reviews said, 'My mother was a drug addict. I could never understand why this happened to her until I read this little book. And I got it. And it wasn't my fault.' It was such an amazing thing to have happen. I've worked with tons of women and children who have been in terrible situations, but to know that just this tiny book reaches out to someone's heart—it just made me so open, and I was so grateful to be able to reach out and still touch people at eighty in San Diego."

"Hey, you look pretty good for eighty."

"So do you! We're a month apart. We're hanging in there."

"Yeah, we are. I look like my grandmother."

"Well, you do as well. That happens. I have a grandfather, yeah."

"So, Susie, I have to say—I want to raise my candle up for you. The fact that you were able to touch this person's heart like that, this is the kind of thing you remember at the end of your life. Just that one thing makes such a difference in this world. And I'm so touched by it. For those of us who live with a lot of suffering in our families—yes, there's enormous suffering in societies, in the world—but children tend to think it's their fault. Because to think it's the big people's fault is scarier."

It's terrifying to contemplate. What do I do with that? But if you think it's your fault, you think, well, maybe if I make myself better, things will change. And your gift to her was such a beautiful gift. Thank you.

*

I love you so much.

Well, I love you too. This is wonderful.

Happy eighty. You've got some more beautiful things to do.

We both do.

Peace out.

*

Good solstice to you.

I just want to thank you for that dharma talk. It's just what I needed, and I feel really opened and hopeful and connected to sangha. I really appreciate the words that you share.

Thank you so much. I just want to stay with you for a moment because there's a little glow. I'm very glad about that. Does it inspire you to manifest in any particular way? Just curious.

Well, I think I've been struggling with negativity around me. It inspires me to hold my course.

And is it people around you, or is it the culture, the politics?

Well, it's probably everything, but it's some people. I moved away from my home where I've lived for many, many years. I moved down to Marin County to be near my grandkids, which is wonderful, but I haven't found my dear friends and family. So I'm around people whose outlook on life isn't where I want my path to be going.

Pause for a moment. This is really important, what you're talking about. Yes, there is negativity around, and people we know are in the society at large. That's part of the game. There were these monks and nuns who came to the Buddha and said, "Things are really negative around us. Maybe we should leave, go somewhere else." And he said, "Do you think you won't find it somewhere else? We stay." Then he said, "Stay. Hold the course. Stay with what's true for you."

Stay with what's true for you, which is your carrying of the light you have. If you could put it in a sentence or two, what would that message be? That's your message, not theirs.

Nothing's permanent. And just go towards the love. That's what helps. Go toward the love.

I'll put it on a bumper sticker. I like it. Especially since you're driving and you're going somewhere, you might as well drive toward the love.

Thank you, Claire.

Hi, Jack.

Hi, Toby. Hello, dear.

First of all, thank you, because no matter what happens, every so often I think, "Oh God, there's so much anger and violence and malice going on—how do you do anything about it?"

When 9/11 happened, I was in a skyscraper in New York, and people were telling me there might be another plane coming. I remember thinking, "If I die today, at least everybody that I love knows I love them." I remember thinking, okay, I really don't want to die, but at least that. At least that.

And so over the years since then, I've thought about what happens to the people who don't know that anybody loves them. There are so many kinds of love—I don't mean it has to even be personal. I do volunteer work, and I get to see a lot of people. And I realized how many of them have no idea that anybody sees them at all.

This is why I love the story about the dove, because I think maybe just to make a little difference—a little branch, maybe, for that dove to land on.

I've always been, although most people don't believe it, really shy. I feel I don't want to be intrusive. And I finally thought: just do it. So what if they don't like it?

I chose one person in particular who had what we might call a menial but really important job, because this is a rehab hospital. Nobody speaks to her, and she speaks to nobody. One time I asked her what she was doing for Thanksgiving. She said, "Oh, I'm feeding the homeless."

A couple of months later, I said, "Can I speak to you?" She said, "Is something wrong?" And I said, "No, I have a little gift for you, because I thought of you the other day and I thought how remarkable you are. And I bet nobody here knows." She said, "No, they don't. They don't know." She said, "This is wonderful. You made my day."

Now she waves to me. She smiles. And I thought, it's not a big thing, but at least she knows.

I've tried this in different ways. It's not about me—it's about seeing this response of somebody. Someone said to me, "This is about love." And it is about love. I found myself so much more open. My husband would laugh when a good waiter would come on a busy day and I'd say, "Should I tell your manager?" And then he saw them say, "Don't move—my manager's over there. I'm bringing him over this minute to hear that you thought I was good."

So what you did for me tonight, and you've done it for forty years—thank you—is that you let me see that maybe it's not unimportant. Maybe it's something to just keep doing, because maybe I might be the only voice that person hears. And if so, maybe that counts.

So touched. I'd like you to look at all the little people in the squares on the screen. See them, and realize that what you just described, you can do that. They're all now being seen and recognized and kind of loved up by you. You can do that.

Even tonight, what you described, that woman didn't know she was being recognized. Her beauty wasn't being seen. And there they are, all these people, many of them smiling, being acknowledged. I hope—because I think this is what we can do for each other. Maybe we can't contribute financially or maybe we can't physically do some things, but we can see each other.

And the thing it's done for me is it has convinced me how many more wonderful, beautiful people there are in this world than nasty, vindictive, or disturbed people. And I'm so much richer for knowing that. In so many ways.

Thank you, Toby.

Thank you, Jack. That's a gift.

You have really made this possible.

Well, you too. We're in it together.

Let's do one more. Nancy.

Hi, Nancy.

I don't know if you remember me, but a couple months ago you were doing a talk and I had just been to Homeboy Industries. So we were talking about the wonderful work that he does, just loving everyone—loving even the... He does work with gang members who've killed people, and he just loves them. He loves them back to sanity and he loves them back to wholeness.

That has really been helpful in my life, to love family members that are having a hard time. But I have to say that just recently I read your book, *A Path with Heart*, finally. I think I had read it once before, because when I went to find it on my Kindle, it was there already. And at the very end of it, you describe how when you were a monk, at one point you were asked to bow to the leaders, to the teachers. And that was fine. And then you were asked to bow to your peers, and that was a little bit difficult. But eventually you loved it, because you could see the respect. And you realized that bowing to every single person, no matter who they are or what they do... at least this is what I got out of it. And all of a sudden I realized that respect is just as important as love—or it's kind of like a different kind of love. Anyway, that really touched me deeply, and I thank you for it.

I thank you too. And I want to acknowledge a couple of things. Yes, I remember our conversation. So for those listening, if you have not read Father Greg Boyle's book *Tattoos on the Heart*, it's one of the most astonishing modern books of spiritual teaching that I could recommend to anyone. The fact that he does that work, as you say, with gang members who've been shooting at each other, and then they're there in the same room with him, ones who are enemies—his wisdom and his big heart is enough to hold them all. It's just remarkable.

And then you say maybe respect is love, which is one of the themes of the beginning of this new book I have. I start with a story that I've told here probably recently, of a little boy who goes out to a restaurant. He's seven years old, with his parents. The waitress comes and says, "What will you have?" And he says, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." And his mom says, "He'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a glass of milk." The waitress takes all the other orders, and then as she's leaving the table, she looks back at the little boy and says, "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?" And he lights up and says, "She thinks I'm real."

And when you talk about love being respect, it really is a dimension of love—to see with the eyes of respect for everybody. Part of it is to see also what they've suffered. Some of the people who are doing the most egregious things have also suffered: their mental illness, or the suffering of their community, or all kinds of other things. And just from the heart to see with respect everybody's journey.

It doesn't mean you can't stand up, you can't stop. Thank you to Ahmad Ahmed, who grabbed that guy in Sydney with his gun and stopped him from killing more people. Hallelujah. Thank you for doing that. Doesn't mean you can't stand up, but you can do it with love. And that's really what you're saying.

He transforms these guys, and some of them are like his top administrators now. It's just magnificent to see how these people can transform, how we all have the capability of transforming our lives. Seeing the goodness in each being.

And I just thank you for your stories tonight. The snowflake story—there's one person who maybe can change peace for the world. And that can be you or me or any of us tonight.

So let's pause, because I want everybody who's listening to hear that this last half hour or however long it's been, I haven't been actually teaching. I've been going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, great, thank you." Because the teachings have been coming so beautifully. It's crowdsourced now. We're all carrying it. And we're all carrying our light.

So let's pause for a minute. And just let yourself reflect and sense—as the world is turning and the solstice is coming and the great cosmic pause, the sacred pause—sense that you're here for something, here to add your gifts, here to add your light. And it starts exactly here, where we are. Like the snowflakes, every gesture and voice and moment of respect. What a gift you carry. That's who you are. Don't be shy.

So let's just be quiet for thirty seconds. Maybe look at the screen if you want while you're quiet and beam a little love and light to all the faces in the little squares. Lots of people we know, some we don't know. They're all weird, you know? Take a look, right? Aren't we? And they're all immensely interesting and wild and lovable. They all have a light. They all carry something beautiful. Every one of them.

So thank you, dear ones. Have good holy days, as they're called. It's not just about shopping. It is the holy days. And I'll see you anon. Take good care.

See?

So thank you, dear ones. Have good holy days—as they're called. It's not just about shopping; these truly are the holy days. I'll see you anon. Take good care.

CHAPTER 58

Living with Freedom and Love

Jack Kornfield · 1h41

> *In this heartfelt Monday night talk, Jack Kornfield weaves together guided meditation, personal stories, and timeless Buddhist wisdom to address how we can live with freedom and love during challenging times. The evening begins with a profound gratitude meditation, inviting practitioners to thank the breath, body, heart, and mind for all they carry, ultimately resting in the vast field of loving awareness that is our true nature.*
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> *Kornfield shares recent experiences—from Ram Dass legacy retreats to teaching in Costa Rica, working with trauma specialists, and developing ethical AI—illustrating how the Dhamma applies across all contexts. He recounts Christina Figueres' transformative time with Thích Nhất Hạnh before the Paris Climate Accord, demonstrating how shifting from separation to interconnection can change everything. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Nisargadatta, and the Majjhima Nikāya, he emphasizes that liberation comes not from attachment to views or preferences, but from recognizing ourselves as the spacious awareness witnessing all experience.*
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> *The talk addresses working with suffering, trauma, and outrage without letting these experiences harden the heart. Kornfield distinguishes between rage and outrage, inviting practitioners to drop beneath reactive emotions to touch the depth of caring underneath. He emphasizes the importance of saṅgha—that we cannot navigate these waters alone but need the collective wisdom and support of spiritual community. The session concludes with questions about caring for aging parents, holding grief alongside gratitude, and the practice of mettā for those who are suffering.*

It seems especially important in these somewhat chaotic and, for many people, uncertain and difficult times that we find a way to come together and link our hands and our hearts and our consciousness in a way that brings out benevolence and goodness and courage and presence and love—all those values that are central to the teachings of the Buddha, but that are really part of all natural and wise spiritual life.

Monday nights, for me—I began teaching them more than forty years ago, in the mid-1980s. Over the first thirty-plus years, I taught them every week, which was wonderful, often in person at Spirit Rock. Now, in this cycle of pulling back a bit in certain ways from teaching, I do them periodically for Spirit Rock. What I love about them is they're a way for me to both speak things that are tender and important and hopefully

helpful to you—drawing from more than fifty years of practice and teaching as a Buddhist teacher and psychologist—and equally to connect with you in the questions and responses.

Whatever brings you this evening, wherever you are, you're truly welcome. Spirit Rock is a welcoming place that invites you to take your seat among the generations and thousands of years of people who have practiced compassion, loving-kindness, mindfulness, and liberation.

So let's begin. Let yourself find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease. Once you find a stable way to sit, when you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently. Perhaps take two or three long breaths to help you settle.

The spirit of tonight's meditation of mindful, loving awareness also invites a consciousness infused with gratitude. The great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, "If you made no other prayer in your whole life but 'thank you,' that would be enough." Thank you for it all—the beauty and the trouble.

My dear friend and colleague Brother David Steindl-Rast is about to turn one hundred years old. He has a fantastic website called gratefulness.org, full of practices of gratitude.

So here you are. Your eyes are closed. You've taken a few breaths. Let yourself settle. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a little bit of a circle to release your neck. Come to a simple upright posture. Take another deep breath and let the shoulders relax. Let the arms and hands rest easily.

You're inhabiting your whole body with awareness. Feel the weight of your body on the seat and how you can settle in. Sink into it and feel underneath—the ground and the earth. You are part of the earth, which is true. You take your seat, connected and steady.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of this mysterious body that consciousness inhabits. You can feel the whole field of sensations of all different kinds, just now, without trying to fix or change—just open simply. Sense this field of vibration and tingling, warm and cold, the whole body seated on the earth, part of the earth. Relax and settle as you do.

Add a little half-smile to your lips, as Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested. Even if things are difficult, you are the Buddha seated in the midst of it all.

Now notice how your body is breathing itself. Nothing to do or change. Just feel it. It breathes the whole body—or the coolness in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. Wherever you feel the movement of breath, relax into it with a half-smile.

Notice, as you do, inviting the breath to breathe any way it wants, how your breath is your friend. It's kept you alive for all these years. It breathes you together with the people nearby, exchanging breaths in the same room, in the same city, all breathing together. It breathes you with the trees and the plants and the oceans. The whole planet is breathing together.

Relax and feel yourself being breathed.

Half smile, gracious. Relax, sense the rhythm, just as it is.

Now say thank you to your breath. Thank you, dear breath. Thank you for taking care of me, for breathing me again and again. Thank you for connecting me in this ocean of air. Thank you—as if to bow to the breath—for caring and loving me. Smiling a little. And notice how it feels to be grateful for breath.

Now open the mindfulness, the mindful loving awareness, to notice the whole field of sensation of your body. This breathing body. And when you pay attention, there's no solid body. There are areas of warmth and cool, tingling, pressure, pain, pleasure, vibration. The field of the body experience is always changing, even very subtly—vibrating, moving. And you can relax and hold it all in mindful, loving awareness.

Notice what happens when you invite the body to relax, when you hold it in kind attention. You can also notice how much your body carries. Yes, there are pleasures for which you can be grateful. And there are the burdens—the stress that's carried in the shoulders, the tightness in the gut or the back or the jaw. All the things that your body carries for you, along with all the sweetness of life. Notice how much it carries with the same loving awareness, not trying to change it, but holding it in kindness and compassion for all it does.

Now you can say thank you to your body with this loving awareness. Thank you for all you carry, just as you thanked the breath. Thank this body of life for carrying you through pleasure and pain, through difficulty and beauty. Thank you. I'm okay just now, present with you. You can relax. Thank you. And notice, as you hold the whole of your body with kindness, how it responds.

Now shift your attention to the area of the heart—not just the physical heart, but the emotional heart, the feeling heart. Notice the state of your heart just now. Peaceful, sad, excited, longing, loving, anxious, frustrated—all the emotions of the heart. You are acknowledging what's present, what your heart carries just now, with a respectful, loving awareness, just noticing with appreciation how much the heart carries.

And wrap the heart with kindness and compassion, especially the hard things that it carries. Hold it with so much kindness, as if you could hold a child in your arms. This amazing human heart you carry—all the longings and fear and love and opening—you hold it all. So tender. If you want, you can even put a hand on your heart. Wrap it in kindness and compassion. And that little half smile.

And say thank you. Thank you for caring so much. You can relax. I'm meditating. I'm okay just now. Take a deep breath. Invite your heart to relax and put down its worries. It's okay. Thank you for caring so much. We're good right now. Thank you. And notice what happens.

Now shift your attention to your mind—that very, very busy force that secretes thoughts out of nowhere like the salivary gland secretes saliva. They just appear: pictures and words and plans and memories and concerns and hopes and scenarios and music and all the things the mind keeps creating, nonstop. First, you just feel the movement of the mind, and you sense it with mindful, loving awareness.

Not trying to change it or make it different. Just feel its movement and its power. And wrap the whole movement of mind with compassion and kindness. It's so busy trying to take care of you—to plan and protect and imagine and help and create and fix, to be and become.

You just wrap that whole thinking, planning, envisioning, remembering, imagining, creating—you wrap that whole busyness of mind in a great big circle of compassion and kindness. And say thank you. Thank you for working so hard to protect me and help me, to get me through this life in a good way. Working so hard. You can relax now. I'm meditating. It's okay. We're all right just now. Take a rest and soften and quiet, and trust that from this quieter place we can navigate beautifully.

And notice what happens when you bow to the busyness of mind, surround it with kindness and say, thank you, it's okay. Thank you for all you do. You can relax now a bit. You can quiet. We're okay.

And feel the space that gratitude opens, that kindness opens. For who you are is bigger than the mind. You're the awareness, bigger than all the emotions, that notices the joys and sorrows and tears and longing. You're bigger than the changing sensations of

the body. You're the field of awareness itself, consciousness itself, that was born into this body. Yes, you've been aware of the feelings and thoughts and body, but who you are is this awareness itself—vast and timeless. Rest in it. Relax into it. It's who you really are.

And notice how in this open awareness, there are not rigid boundaries. Yes, there are boundaries of the body, and deep and shallow breaths, and emotions that come and go. But let yourself feel that you are connected with life, with all of it, and with all that you care about. The breathing and breath and well-being of so many others that share this life. The trees and plants and oceans—you breathe with them all. And when you open, there's this profound caring, because it's all you. It's all who you are. All of it.

And as the great sage Nisargadatta said, wisdom tells me I am nothing, and love tells me I am everything. And in this space of loving awareness, you say thank you. Thank you to the breath that breathes you. Thank you to this amazing body that experiences and carries and opens you. Thank you to your heart and all the love and longing and sweetness and pain, the grief and excitement and tenderness. Thank you. Thank you, dear heart.

And to the busy mind that's trying to help you and protect you, take care of you—thank you. And to all the interwoven life on this earth that you are a part of, the suffering and the joy, the beginnings and endings. Feel the natural care and love for it all, that you will do what you can to care.

And who you are is the vast awareness born into this body, saying thank you. Thank you to it all.

When you're ready, take one more or two more deep breaths and then gently let your eyes open. Make a last bow of thank you to it all.

In a couple of minutes, we'll take a five-minute break before the teachings. In this quiet space, I would invite you to put into the chat anything you learned or discovered or felt or experienced that was meaningful for you in this meditation. We get to share together.

"Being held in a field of love, suddenly everything becomes more simple." "My heart was grateful to rest, dissolving into separateness." "Difficulty, but being held by Jack's voice." "A much needed pause." "Stillness and presence." "I lose sight of my creativity

and imagination and wonder—thank you." "Surprised when tears came." "The great vast peace of being." "I loved encouragement to thank my mind." "Like the first things I really heard today, and a deep universal sense of gratitude." So much more.

Thank you all for being part of that meditation, and thank you for joining this evening class and sitting.

Now I'd like to speak to you as a teacher. It's kind of my job—you've got to come here and say something. I want to talk about freedom and liberation and love in a more embodied way.

It's been some months since I've taught a Monday night, and I considered doing a traditional talk—the heart practices, the inner path of insight meditation, or the interpersonal steps of the Eightfold Path: right speech and right action and so forth. Then I thought maybe it would be interesting to be more informal tonight and talk about what life has presented me in the months since I've been here with you.

I've been traveling and also engaged in teachings. I teach online, for example, the MMTCP—Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program—which has been wonderful and currently has one thousand people in it. We've now had eight thousand people in seventy-five countries who've gone through this training that Tara and Brock and I and others do. It's very inspiring to have people in Nairobi working in a school with kids, or a women's center in Lahore, Pakistan, teaching mindfulness and forgiveness and compassion.

Along with that kind of teaching, Trudy and I were in Hawaii in December—not a hardship post. But we went, as we do every year, for the Ram Dass Legacy Retreat. We'd been with him for many years, and after he died, we and Krishna Das and others kept it going.

I love teaching with Trudy. Basically, I love being married to Trudy because she's like the coolest, best, amazing, wonderful woman I could be with. She's really extraordinary, and I feel so grateful for her—joyful, wise, dharma, playful spirit.

There in Hawaii, there were Ram Dass teachings and stories. I remember when I first met Ram Dass—he was such an amazing teacher back in 1972, and when I listened, he was such a great storyteller. I loved that channel of storytelling. Later on, when I worked with him and visited, after we'd been teaching together, he said, "You know, you tell too many stories." And I said, "Ram Dass, you know, I learned this somewhere, and I still love doing it." And he laughed.

What was beautiful when Ram Dass taught is he talked about the liberation of the heart and how we could love anywhere and love anything. He spoke of what it was like to be with his guru, who accepted every single part of him and saw no impurities. In India, it's called "the glance of mercy"—when someone sees into your heart and your soul and loves you. Ram Dass was so transformed by that.

And at the same time as he was teaching, he was this great public neurotic because he would talk about all the times he flunked the course. When he was a new teacher wearing the white robes and the beard and his beads, he said, "I'd go out there and the first thing I'd do would be to count the house, see how many people came to see me." And of course, then he would share it. There was something so liberating because he wasn't attached to who he was. He was playing with it.

His *Be Here Now*, which changed much of the culture, really invited us into a field of aloha, of love, using that Hawaiian expression. As it says in the Metta Sutta of loving kindness—omitting none, this is Sylvia Boorstein's favorite phrase—to love, omitting none. And so there was such inspiration from Ram Dass, even at the last of his life, where he became so loving and pure-hearted.

There he was in his wheelchair. He'd been in a wheelchair with this major stroke for twenty years, couldn't move his arm and leg on one side of his body. Lots of pain and infections. Someone who was visiting said, "Ram Dass, are you in pain?" And he said, "Yes, some." He paused for a bit and then said, "I love my pain."

What an extraordinary statement. In the great teachings of Zen Master Sengcan, the Third Zen Patriarch Ancestor, he says, "The great way is not difficult for those who are not attached to their preferences." Ram Dass began to embody for all of us this extraordinary capacity—yes, he had preferences, but not to be attached, to be free.

This is really the teachings. If you look in the texts of the Buddha, he talks about the ways we get attached. And of course my teacher Ajahn Chah was very much—his simple teaching was to let things go. You'd come and he'd ask, "Are you suffering?" If you said no, he said, "Great." And if you said yes, he said, "Oh, something else to let go of."

When you read the teachings of the Buddha, he talks about the way we hold on to our views, to criticism and praise, and so forth. He said first, to be liberated is to not be attached to your views, not to be fixed in the way you think things are supposed to be. And then he went on—this is one of the few times I think he was kind of making a joke in the text—where he said those who cling to their opinions go around the world both-

ering everyone else. There was this invitation for a gracious heart, peaceful, smiling, not attached to our views and opinions. The great way is not difficult if you are not attached to your preferences of any kind.

It was very pure-hearted at the end of Ram Dass's life, and it inspired me and it should inspire you because this is the invitation to freedom. Not your opinions and not the way it's supposed to be. Sometimes it hurts and sometimes it's pleasurable, and it just is what it is. Who you are is the space of loving awareness, the witness, the consciousness.

So then we went on to Costa Rica to teach, Trudy and I, where we've been going now for several years to write and teach. Trudy calls it adult summer camp because we're there with Dan Siegel and Elissa Epel and Roshi Joan Halifax and Bessel van der Kolk and others.

One of the most inspiring people we were sitting with was Christiana Figueres, whose father was the founding president of Costa Rica, who disbanded the army and said, "We'll put all the military money into health care and education." We were talking about climate change, inner and outer climate.

Before the Paris Climate Accord some years ago, she was a UN diplomat in charge of organizing it. And it was terrible. There was so much infighting between the different countries—whose fault it was and who was going to pay. She was kind of desperate. A friend said, "You know, there's this place in southern France with a Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. I think you should go visit him."

In the midst of this terrible time, she went down and spent a couple of weeks with Thich Nhat Hanh, and it changed everything. She sat and he showed her what it was like to live with a peaceful heart, what it was like not to be attached to your opinions. He had the deep teaching of interdependence that she now teaches. Freedom from separation.

She knew when she spent that time with him that she had to step out of all the conflict of her life. He said, "Walk with me so slowly. Sit. Feel how you're connected with everything. It all breathes together." And it changed her.

She went back to Paris, and instead of seeing the enemies and who was at fault and who was to be judged and who owed money and who was the victim—which was the consciousness of that movement there—she understood from Thich Nhat Hanh that it was all a big family. Of course, you know how families are.

They're not that easy. But we're all there together. And it changed everything. She was able to get—whatever it was—198 countries to sign on to the Paris Climate Accord. And of course, our conversation went on: well, what about now, where it's being undone? But it's not completely undone. We have to stand up and work for it. The consciousness of humanity has changed in many cases. And there was a sense of freedom there—the freedom from separation that the Buddha taught, of liberation, that you're not separate.

A poem from Alison Luderman:

Sun drapes a buttered scarf across my cheek.
Rose opens herself to my glance.
Rain shares its divine melancholy.
The whole world keeps whispering to you,
nibbling your ear like a neglected lover.
Sun drapes a buttered scarf across your cheek.
Rose opens herself to your glance.
Rain shares its divine melancholy.
The whole world keeps whispering to you.

And Christiana embodied this. This was the teaching in the forest monastery—staying connected to the natural world. If you feel bad, don't even bother raising your hand. If things seem really dire, go out and put your hand on a tree. Stand there for five or ten minutes and let it speak to you. Listen to it. Feel the depth. Remember that after the Buddha's enlightenment—at least as the story goes—he moved away from the Bodhi tree and sat for six days and nights in gratitude, simply gazing at the tree and the life and the enlightenment that it had allowed him to have. So when you're lost, find a tree. Find a place in nature.

Then, staying in Costa Rica, I got sick. I'd actually been a little bit sick before I left. I developed a systemic infection and ended up having to go to the hospital for five days. Now I'm quite fine. But I thought, "Ah, hospital—I can practice. I'll do my breath, I'll do mindfulness, whatever. It's okay." And the staff was immensely caring. In Costa Rica, the greeting is *pura vida*—pure life, or pure heart. They say it and they mean it. And nobody sues. It's a sort of national health care system, so you don't have to worry about litigation. No one scares you, telling you all the horrible things they need to disclose so you don't sue them. Instead, what you get are these loving, caring doctors and nurses and health workers.

I thought, okay. I go in the hospital. I'm cool with it. My daughter came down. She said, "Dad, you're eighty years old. You're in the hospital. I have to spend some time with you." And we had a beautiful time together. Trudy couldn't come because she had a bad cold and didn't want other people to get sick. After my daughter left, I still had all these tubes poked into me. They wake you up at night, they spear you, they do all this. I had a kind of rough night, thinking, "God, how long will this go? Maybe I'll be stuck here for weeks."

Maybe I'll die here, whatever. You know how the mind is. How long will it be? What happens?

And then I remembered visiting Ajahn Chah after he was in his late sixties. He had diabetes, water in the brain. He had been in the hospital and had a shunt put from his brain down. He went through a really very difficult physical time. I was visiting him and I said, "I'm glad you're out of the hospital." And then I said, of course, from the beginning you always gave us the Buddhist teaching that this human life also has old age, sickness, and death. It's kind of like a Buddhist mantra. And I said that to him, and he looked at me—here he was like sixty-eight and I was like twenty-eight—and he shook his head and he said, "Don't you say that so lightly."

You know, it all passed, but it doesn't mean that it's easy. I like Suzuki Roshi's phrase: suffering Buddha, sun Buddha, moon Buddha, joyful Buddha, suffering Buddha. This is the dance of human incarnation. And then when you read the texts of the Buddha, when things that are difficult arise, sometimes there's the phrase: bear it as a noble one, bear it with dignity. And that's your freedom. Not that it's not difficult, but it's all part of the game, because who we are is the loving witness of it. And our body goes through all the things it does.

So I got this message—would I do some teachings for the Mantra Festival in Ukraine? I said, "What do you want me to do?" They said, "We have ten thousand people who come online mostly, who've been experiencing so much loss, so much grief and fear, cruelty, such deep uncertainty. And we want to know if there's some way that you can help us to be with all of this and not let it poison our hearts. Not let it harden our hearts."

And of course, I thought about that statement from the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree when he was attacked by the armies of Mara—first all the desire and temptation, then by spears and arrows and armies, and finally by doubt itself: "What right do you have to sit here?" And the Buddha's response was to reach down with one hand

and say, "The earth is my witness." The earth is my witness that I have the right to sit here as a human being with dignity and care, to be here with compassion for all, to be free. And this is the invitation for you.

When I think about what I'll be saying to the people in Ukraine, I think about how Ajahn Chah's forest monastery was in the Ubon province, on the border of both Cambodia and Laos, during the American bombing of those countries—enormous amounts of bombing. The jets and bombers would go overhead and people would say, "You have to do something. You have to get out and stop the war." And Ajahn Chah would say, "You have to stop the war where it begins, in your own heart. Learn to sit and stop the war." He said, "Wars come and go. Yes, you can go out and do what you can, but the monastery is a living library, a living legacy to teach you that there can be a place of peace."

The jets would fly overhead, activists would come, people who'd been soldiers. And you'd enter into the monastery, this forest, and people were so respectful and loving. You'd remember: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be wise?

Now, it's not that easy. And I don't know what I can say to the people of Ukraine, because I can barely imagine living through what many of them have. But I do know what it's been like to work in the past with people who literally survived the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, or survived genocide—Rohingya, Darfur. And I pass on the teachings of the Buddha and my own understanding, which is kind of limited. But I also borrow the moral authority of my teachers.

I may not be able to say to a Holocaust survivor what they should do about forgiveness or releasing the burdens of their heart, but I can tell them about Maha Ghosananda—after all nineteen members of his family were killed, his temple burned, the whole village destroyed, and two million people killed in the Cambodian genocide. I can describe him standing in front of a hundred thousand people in the refugee camp, chanting, "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed," until they all began to chant with him.

To borrow the moral authority of the Dalai Lama, of Maha Ghosananda, and others, and say: this is possible, and it's possible for you. Don't let them poison your heart.

I've been working with various philanthropists, and I think of one great philanthropist who's kind of like George Soros—enormous benefit, and attacked as George Soros has been.

And I said to them, "You know, all the attacks you're getting for supporting things that we might—some of us anyway—might be in favor of: mitigating climate change, or greater equality, or education for everyone, or care for the poorest, or healthcare across Africa, or whatever it happened to be, lots of those." And I knew how difficult it was, and I said, "You know, you need backup."

They said, "What do you mean by backup?"

The next week I went to visit them, and I brought about a dozen or fifteen photographs. One of Martin Luther King. One of Leymah Gbowee, who got the Nobel Prize in Liberia. Wangari Maathai, who got the Nobel Prize for the Kenyan Green Belt in East Africa. Sojourner Truth. Harriet Tubman. Mahatma Gandhi. I filled out this big table in their office.

And I said, "I want you to sit with them and gaze at them and imagine them gazing back. Because what's happening to you, it's not new. They've been through it. All of them were attacked. Many were in prison. Feel the dignity and the character and the dharma of wisdom and compassion they carried. This is you. This is your birthright. These are your people."

And we sat and we practiced together. Bear it with dignity.

I'm supposed to go teach at Oxford—Trudy and I both—in September. It's one of the biggest trauma conferences in the world, and it has the usual great trauma leaders of this time: Dick Schwartz with Internal Family Systems, Bessel van der Kolk of *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dan Siegel, probably Elissa Epel. Many of these people are friends of mine.

And I thought, what am I going to teach there? Because all these people gathered at this great conference, and there are already so many people who are helpful for trauma. Then I realized that I had something to say.

When I trained as a psychologist fifty years ago—half a century—trauma was hardly mentioned. It wasn't there much in the clinical world. People were dealing with other things: your family, the judgment inside, all the fears, all that stuff. And then in the decades since, there's been this revolution, when very fine teachers and clinicians have found ways to help with trauma. Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing, working with the way trauma is held in the body. Bessel van der Kolk. The EMDR work of eye movement that really helps with trauma. Dick Schwartz and Internal Family Systems. Francine Shapiro.

So all this is great. But it's gotten out of balance the other way. Initially, there was not much attention to trauma. And now it's swung so that everything is trauma. "Tell me your name and what's your trauma." People are characterized that way. The problem is that they identify with it. The truth is we all carry trauma, but this trigger warning thing—"Oh, you have to be careful. I'm going to talk about the Cambodian genocide or the Holocaust. I better warn you first."

When you went to see Ajahn Chah in his forest monastery, he had at his fingertips the medicine of the Dharma. If you came in and you were a farmer and your barn burned down, he would help you with that grief. If you came in and you'd been a soldier and you had regrets for what you did, he would give you practices for healing. If you came in and you couldn't steady yourself because you were in a circumstance where you might lose your job and you were frightened and you didn't know what to do, he gave you a practice. If you came in and your children somehow were in danger, he would offer a practice.

For some people, it would be sitting meditation. For others, it would be loving-kindness for themselves or someone else. For some who couldn't even sit still, he would say, "Come here for a week or two and just do walking meditation. Feel your feet on the earth, or maybe touch the tree." For some people who were so discombobulated, he would say, "Go and join the monks and the lay people in the kitchen and spend a few weeks preparing food for others to eat, and let it help regulate you. All this stuff will come."

And we would sit and do some chanting: all things are impermanent, let's hold them all with compassion and loving-kindness, the Four Noble Truths—all of that. But he had the medicine because it was actually not trauma. It was suffering.

It was our universal human condition. And he didn't make it special or say, "You're the one," or "All of you have trauma." What you have is a human incarnation. And then he offered it in a beautiful way, just as the Buddha had said in the Anguttara Nikaya:

"Just as if there were a beautiful pond with pleasant shores, its water being clear, agreeable, cool, transparent. And a person came by, scorched and exhausted by heat and fatigue, parched and thirsty, having suffered greatly. And they would step into the pond and bathe and drink, and all their plight and fatigue and feverishness would be allayed."

And so, my friends, whenever one hears the Buddhist dharma and teachings—whether it be discourses, poetry, prose, explanations, marvelous statements—all one's plight and fatigue and the feverish burning of the heart are allayed.

This is what it was in that monastery. It wasn't "you're traumatized," but "you're human." And of course, we've all suffered loss and disappointment. We've all had this because it's being human. And yet the heart is big enough to hold it all and find a place of peace and dignity and loving awareness amidst it all.

A few more things, and then we'll get to some questions. I've been working in Silicon Valley and become part of a wonderful group of friends doing a venture capital firm called Wisdom Ventures, dedicated to bringing resources from people who want to invest into companies that promote compassion and mutual care and individual and collective well-being. It's been a true pleasure because we have a wonderful team—Bradley Horowitz, our former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who's been so great helping us look at companies doing drug development or mental health work and tackling loneliness.

Some of my favorite investments: we invested in a company that put blood pressure cuffs and blood oxygen monitors in Black barbershops across the South, because there are so many people in that community who don't necessarily have easy access to medical care. If you take your blood pressure and it's high, or you have a blood oxygen level that's low, the screen will say, "Here are the clinics, here are the free doctors, here's where you can go to get help."

We're also invested in ethical AI—if such a thing exists—but we're there to try to promote and prompt AI to be as compassionate and caring as it can. All of these efforts, led through my dear friend Bo Xiao, have led to working with many leaders in AI. In particular, I got called by a project called Positive AI. They want to find a way to create filters for wellbeing in all the large AI models—ChatGPT, Claude, Meta, and so forth—for all their answers. What they want to do, and what we've started to do, is create this huge dataset of wisdom and compassion from all traditions: indigenous, religious, psychological, philosophical. Starting with fifty contributors, then five hundred, and then through them, five thousand people beginning to crowdsource all the input we can.

I called in a lot of favors. I called all the spiritual teachers I know and said, "Would you help with this? Would you help us create this?" Because you can already ask ChatGPT or Claude to give you an answer from a place of wisdom. But not many people ask. You still have to ask directly. And remember that for ethics in AI models, most of the ethics come from the ordinary average of the entire internet. Think about that. Is that where we want our ethics to come from?

So instead, we're beginning to help train—through this process that we all hope works—a whole field through which the models and artificial intelligence can begin to sense what the common understandings of the wise heart are, of compassion, of mutual care.

Part of it is also the deep sense of questioning. When I work with people now, it used to be that as a teacher I would just answer questions. People would ask, I'd give an answer, and I thought that's what teachers are supposed to do. But now I'll say, "What makes you ask?" Because they might say, "Tell me about karma," and I could go on for an hour about the many kinds of karma. But if I say, "What makes you ask?" they might say, "Well, my younger sister died," or "My cousin won the lottery," or "My family has to move because of insecurity in the economy or immigration." As soon as they answer immediately and directly, then we can have a real conversation.

As William Blake said, "If one is to do good, it must be in the minute particulars."

So, what makes you ask? We talk about that, and then I'll say, "What does the wisest part of you say to this?" Very often it's amazing what the wisest part will say, but people forget to ask. And then I might say, if it's a group, "What have others learned about this?"—about grieving a family member, or caring for someone, or having to move suddenly. What have others learned? It's a crowdsourcing.

In these times, we need our collective wisdom. This is what we're trying to promote through this project of Positive AI—that it might be this way. We need each other. This is sangha. Sangha is the company of the wise.

And the idea from the Buddhist teachings is that when we're together and committed to compassion and liberation and a free heart and a care for one another, amazing things are possible. And in these times, we need to stand up for the truth, speak up together. That's part of Sangha—being together in the innate dignity of humanity and saying, yes, this is what matters.

There's this verse from the Buddhist text of the Majjhima, where it says: "Others will be cruel, we shall not be cruel—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will kill, we will not kill—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will engage in harmful sexuality, we shall not do this—thus we shall incline our hearts. Others will speak falsehood, we will speak truth—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be greedy, we shall be generous—thus we will incline our hearts."

And we do this together. We need each other to protect and nourish and share the light of the Dharma, because we all carry it in us.

I love in my work with folks not to say what answer I have, but rather to ask the question: Show me. What do you know? What do others know? And if you read the sutras and the texts, the Buddha asks that. He'll say, "Do you see where this might lead? What do you think?"

There he is wandering, and he meets this farmer. He's carrying his humble alms bowl, and this great wealthy Brahmin farmer says, "I work for a living and therefore I eat. What do you do? You just wander around with your alms bowl." And the Buddha takes his question seriously and says, "I plow, I sow beautiful seeds, and I reap the fruit of the liberated heart." He demonstrates it in this way, and the Brahmin plowman bows to him and says, "I see that you're doing something beautiful."

This is the kind of dialogue and reminder that the Buddha had with everyone—reminding them what they really can see, reminding them what they know. Because our heart does know. We already understand in some way.

The texts say, "Thus shall we think of this fleeting world: as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a dream." They go on. Says the Buddha, "Look at the bubbles floating along the Ganges." Words, thoughts, images, emotions, bodies—all is impermanent, all empty, all arising for a time, empty of solidity because they don't last. I mean, what happened to yesterday? It is gone. It's back with the pyramids and the dinosaurs. Not to speak of Y2K, or the 1960s, or the 1920s, or whatever it was. We have the moment and then it vanishes like the bubbles on the Ganges.

And we who are wise—which is you—can shift to freedom and love forever. You do this in your meditation, training yourself to quiet the mind and open your heart in some repeated, steady, beautiful way. And then, as we did in our practice tonight, you shift from awareness of breath and body, of emotions and thoughts, and you become the space of awareness itself. You shift from the experiences to becoming what Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows," what the Buddha spoke of as timeless awareness.

And Nisargadatta, that wonderful sage, said, "Wisdom tells me I am nothing, and love tells me I am everything. Between these two, my life flows." There's emptiness and nothing, and yet in that openness—I think I'd call it openness rather than emptiness—everything is love. And that's the game. We practice it to embody it and to live it.

One of the most beautiful texts says, "If there are those who practice wisely"—it says "rightly," but I think wisely is a better word—"the world will not be devoid of awakened beings."

So I thank you for your kind attention.

I'm very grateful that I get to do basically pretty cool things still, so I'm glad to share it with you. And more than anything, I hope it inspires you, because we all have this capacity.

What questions or concerns might people want to raise?

"Hi, I don't know if you recognize me, but I started seeing you thirty years ago when you were coming every week on Monday nights in Marin. I'm grateful that I can still see you online now that I live much further away. Someone told me you weren't feeling well, and I didn't know what was going on, so I'm so glad you're doing well because you mean so much to me. I feel like you're one of my teachers I've had over the years. So much gratitude."

"My questions come about mainly because I'm an only child and I have two parents that are aging. My mom, who used to come with me sometimes—you'd always ask me how she was when I would talk to you—has dementia. But interestingly enough, with her journey, she's gotten very mellow. My local Insight Santa Cruz Center sends meditation volunteers to meditate with her, which has been so wonderful and incredible."

"And then there's my father, who has neurological issues. They don't know quite what's going on. He used to be a very spiritual person, and I'm finding near the end of his life that he seems to be suffering. There's very little I can do to kind of force him to do activities that might help him. So it's been an interesting journey—holding them and loving them and figuring out how not to have my peace of mind focused on trying to help them. I was just wondering if you could speak a little about that, because I've been reading different things about codependence and how I can show up and be there for them without having expectations that my well-being is based on how they're doing."

This is beautiful. And you want to be a good daughter, and you want to be a noble human being, and you want to help him die well. How old is he, your dad?

"He's seventy-nine."

So he's a little younger than me. And your mom?

"Seventy-six. They have the same birthday."

So your mom's doing okay. Hallelujah, sweet.

And your dad—you know, there's that very popular book now called *Let Them*. I don't know if you've seen it.

"I have it out of the library right now."

Ajahn Chah would be smiling about it because it's got a lot of really deep wisdom.

People die in character. This is one of the teachings I remember hearing first, close to fifty years ago, from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. You might wish, or you might wish it for yourself: I'm going to lie there and everybody will be around, and I'll have this great kind of celebratory last breath. Hallelujah! Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe I'll be in the hospital with the tubes and pipes and say, "Oh, this is pretty shitty." But then I float out of my body and say, "Wow, that was an intense one." We don't get to choose that.

And we also don't get to change people. When you think about your dad—seventy-nine years—he's got a lot of history behind that.

So what matters? Well, you know what matters. Let me ask you: if you close your eyes for a moment and you think about being with your dad, especially in the very last days of his life, and there you picture yourself being with him—what really matters?

What matters? Tell me.

"Just the love that we've shared over the years. We have a very deep, deep connection. It's just... I guess it's hard for me to see him suffering, having lost his faith as he gets older. But that love is still there."

Yes. So that's very hard. Feel that, feel the suffering—because you're feeling his suffering too.

"It's in my heart center."

So wrap it in compassion, for it's yours. And at least some of it is his. You don't know how much. Just hold it in compassion and see if it can accept a little compassion. You're not trying to fix it. You're just saying, okay, this is suffering, and I'm trying to be present with deep kindness and care. Just be present for it. And notice what happens when you do. Will it accept it?

"I feel like there's a softening."

There's a softening. And you don't know what lesson he needs. I've been with people—I was with somebody dying just a couple of days ago. People die in character, as I said, but they also work things out. The Tibetan bardo doesn't happen after you die and float out of your body, which is what will happen, and you see the lights and such. Trust me, that's likely what you'll see. But it actually starts earlier, and he's in it. He's in the life review, somehow managing within himself, knowing that this is the last act. And you have to let him navigate. Maybe the suffering is the very thing he needs before some other kind of freedom comes. You can't know that. It's not given to you.

There's only one thing given to you. And you said it: to love him just as he is. And to feel compassion. Anything I can do for you, Dad, you can ask. And if he says no, well... trust it. It's not your job to fix him.

"I remember you saying in a previous talk—I think it was you—you can never repay the karmic debt of your parents."

The Buddha said it, actually. I have some backup. But the way to repay that debt is to love him exactly as he is. There he is, suffering Buddha, and you hold him in your heart. If he wants something, he'll tell you. Otherwise, just let him do it his way.

My God, a bossy kid—terrible! Oh, yeah, I just care for him a lot.

Question: Is there a good book on the end of life, the Bardo, that you mentioned, or any good resource?

I don't know, but you might look at Ram Dass's last book called *Walking Each Other Home*. There's a good book.

Question: I appreciate your teachings tonight. They seem very timely for me and touched me deeply. I could feel, listening to you and practicing the gratitude, a deep sense of softening of the heart. And I have to, at the same time, admit that—without naming names and faces or making it particular—with some of the things going on in the world, I'm feeling a lot of rage too. And I don't know how to put the rage and the futility and that love and gratitude in the same container.

So partly what you're describing—I'm going to change the word a tiny bit—is feeling outrage. Outrage that people are being plucked off the street and thrown into concentration camps, or outrage about whatever it is: Ukraine, Darfur, Sudan, whatever it happens to be.

It's interesting to change the word from rage to outrage, because rage you carry in yourself. And is that good for you? How does that actually feel to carry that? Outrage is because you care so much. How dare they? How could this happen? There's a little change in valence.

Close your eyes for a second, because it's not just your question—it's the question of lots of people on the screen there and in our world. What do we do when there are people causing so much suffering?

One of the things is, you feel all that suffering, you know why you're feeling it: because you care so much. You wouldn't feel it if you didn't care. So drop beneath the rage and the outrage and feel how much you care. Notice what that feels like. And if it could give you a message, what would it say?

Response: The first thing is, I feel like I could cry for a thousand years.

So feel that. This is called the ocean of tears, and you're really crying for humanity. All the Buddha's First Noble Truth of suffering in the world that's caused by hatred and greed. You have this vast ocean of tears—let it open. Let it be as big as it wants. You're allowing the ocean of tears. Fill the earth, fill the galaxy. Breathe and give it space. Notice what it wants to do, what comes.

Response: To take the time I need when I need it, and to do the best I can—to do whatever I can. It's saying, with these tears, care for everyone, and care for yourself.

Don't let it harden your heart. Let yourself feel the tears. Let yourself feel how deeply you care. You wouldn't hurt, you wouldn't have this ocean of tears, if it didn't matter to you. And include yourself in the care—that's what it's telling you. As the Dalai Lama says, so much has been taken.

He's seen so much suffering. Why should I let it also take my well-being?

So when you start to feel those other feelings, which are natural, take a breath and drop to this deeper place—really the cosmos of tears, the suffering of humanity and the depth of your caring—and say, "All right, I'll care in the ways I can," and include yourself. And now you've given teachings to everybody listening. So I thank you.

Student: Thank you, Jack. One more thing that came is that I really owe it not only to myself and the people I care most closely for, but also to the people I hope to go and care for. I owe it to them to do my own practice so that I can show up in a mood that's helpful.

Yes, that's really beautiful and very wise. If you go into a refugee camp, they don't want you to be depressed and angry. They've got enough depression of their own. They actually want somebody who has something to offer, to say, "Even here, there's something you can find. There's love that's possible. There's care between us." So you can do that. And then also, how much gratitude that you're in a position to both practice and to be opened and to do whatever you can.

Student: Yes. And to be sufficient to care and tend and then to express that.

So thank you, Steve.

Let's do one more. Beth?

Student: Hi, Jack. Oh, it's Jeff, the Teamster poet friend.

Hi! You're so kind to say that.

Student: It's doggerel. Doggerel from the docks. I'm going to go ahead and hijack this for my own personal need right now. I have a pretty strong gratitude practice. I understand that the things that are not to my preference—I should also have gratitude for them. But one of my dearest friends, forty years, a carpenter essentially who became a home builder and developer—he has spent tireless hundreds of hours working with a couple hundred people to help them get and stay sober. He went into the hospital to have a knee replacement and got an infection there, pneumonia, kidney shutdown. It was supposed to be a three-day trip. We're going into the third week now. And I would just like to ask all of the good people who are on this call to take a moment in whatever you consider to be a prayer or affirmation—please ask for the rapid improvement, or at least the return to comfort, of my friend Michael.

Where is Michael? What city?

Student: Well, he lives in Berkeley and he's at UCSF.

So we'll envision Michael in UCSF with all the staff, the amazing caring staff there, and his body trying to figure out how to renegotiate being alive, which we all hope for. And so as we envision him there, we do our metta: May you be safe. May you get well. May you feel the strength of our love surround you, infuse you, your mitochondria go, "Oh, whoopee, this is great!" You know, every part of you feels that there's a world of love out here.

And then let the love spread to Michael and all the people who are caring for him so that they can feel it and love him and love everybody else they care for. Beautiful.

And then finally, let his hospital be like a beacon of light, shining love and healing to all the other hospitals and people in illness and difficulty. And this is possible.

We can care for each other. And Michael is showing us how we can do it. He's offering them a chance to be as generous and gracious as they are, and offering you a chance to feel how much tenderness you have in your heart.

It's a time of life too, isn't it? You're 80, I'm 73. You start living it. I just didn't expect this particular guy to be the guy. I'm going to a funeral tomorrow morning, and that guy—I expected that to be the guy, considering how he lived his life.

We're talking about our expectations about how long we have. There's some ticket there. Central Casting said you get this role, and then you get called off stage. It's really mysterious. And what's asked in the mystery is somehow to keep a spacious and open heart and say, yes, we can do this. We can live beautifully. And when it's time, we can also let go beautifully.

How wonderful to have this sangha to rely upon in times like this. It is for all of us, for me too.

Hallelujah.

Buddham saranam gacchami, dhammam saranam gacchami, sangham saranam gacchami.

Refuge in the Awakened One and in all who can awaken—the Buddha nature in all. Refuge in the Dharma, in the teachings of the liberated heart. And refuge in the Sangha, so important. We can't do it alone. We do it together. And you can feel it tonight. We're all in this together.

Mostly, take care of your good selves. Keep your presence and your dignity, your Buddha nature, as you navigate these paths—chaotic at times, difficult waters—but you have the Dharma to protect you, and the Buddha and the Sangha as well.

CHAPTER 59

The Listening Heart

Jack Kornfield · 1h32

> *In this heartfelt talk, Jack Kornfield offers teachings on cultivating a listening heart amidst personal and collective difficulties. Beginning with a guided meditation on mindful loving awareness, he invites practitioners to attend to the body, breath, and heart with kindness rather than trying to fix or change what arises. The practice emphasizes receiving whatever emerges—tension, grief, joy, or fear—with compassionate presence.*
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> *Kornfield draws on wisdom from his teacher Ajahn Chah, who taught that our deepest learning often comes through difficulties, and shares stories of resilience from Nelson Mandela, Mahā Ghosānanda walking through the Cambodian killing fields, and the Dalai Lama's response to losing Tibet. He recounts teaching to 10,000 Ukrainians about not letting war imprison their hearts, and tells the inspiring story of Vinoba Bhave's land reform movement, which began simply by sitting and listening deeply to villagers' needs.*
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> *The teaching explores how to respond wisely when triggered by fear or overwhelm—pausing to ask "What is my best intention?" and listening with genuine curiosity rather than reactivity. Kornfield emphasizes that hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed, quoting this ancient teaching from the Dhammapada. He encourages practitioners to trust uncertainty, as Ajahn Chah often taught, and to become "islands of peace" who carry the great heart of the bodhisattva into a troubled world. The talk concludes with reflections on interconnection—how our breath connects us with all beings—and the recognition that each person's loving presence may be the one voice needed for peace to emerge.*

And hello, everybody. Glad to see you on this spring day. What a pleasure. And I love hearing that we have a middle school program. I think about middle school and it is a tremendously confusing time. I don't know about you all, but going through puberty and adolescence, trying to find your place in humanity with all those other kids around you, and then the crazy adults in the world.

We've had a family program for a really long time. My memory is when we were—those of you who've been to the land at Spirit Rock—for about twenty years before we had our beautiful built community hall, we had these six trailers that were hooked together, the holy trailers. We had Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama and all these great teachers come into the trailers, and we could have four hundred people in that room. We had our family program.

I remember one year, I think it was in the springtime for the holiday of the Buddha's birthday, we had a play that Seth Kesselman, who was running it, choreographed. The kids were all playing different roles in the life of the Buddha under this big tree in the meadow there. And then it was time for the Buddha to sit under the Bodhi tree and get enlightened. But of course, as you know in the plot, Mara with his armies attacked Buddha with desires and aggression, saying you shouldn't be awakened, and the Buddha had to finally call on the earth goddess.

So we're all there and it's sort of late afternoon, and one of the kids is sitting under the tree as the Buddha while the others are his attendants. Then out from behind another tree comes Wavy Gravy, who is now playing Mara, all dressed up in his great Mara costume, tempting the Buddha and attacking him in all these ways. And I thought, you know, this is definitely American dharma—to see Wavy Gravy playing Mara and enjoying it.

Everybody loves the scene with Mara because it's our life, right? It's not just the Buddha, but we all have to deal with desire and fear and the aggression around us in the world. To be able to do it playfully and really talk—this was with middle school kids—about what do you do when fear and aggression and all of that arises, and not in some preacherly way, but have Wavy Gravy come and demonstrate, was just fabulous.

So anyway, here we are. Yesterday we had a very big event at Spirit Rock, which was the opening of the new stupa. Really beautiful, and an acknowledgement of the generations of teachers that have grown. Now we've trained really some thousands of teachers around the world. Those who came stood up and people acknowledged and sent them blessings and gratitude from the very beginning, from the people who helped in the 1980s and 90s. That field of connection and care and gratitude was really quite palpable. Some of you might have been there.

As we have it, I taught Monday night every week for thirty or forty years. Then the last few years, I've pulled back to teaching it once a month or every couple of months, especially since Trudy and I turned eighty this past summer and kind of looked at each other and said, "Hmm, eighty, that's a number. Maybe we should take a little pause. If we're going to do something, maybe we should do it." But here we are. The way Monday night goes, we'll start with a meditation, have a short break, then some teaching and some questions and responses. Whatever brings you, it is a great pleasure to join together.

Spring—I think about Easter, Passover, all the other spring holidays. Something in the world is showing itself anew amidst all the troubles.

So let's start with a sitting. Find a way to sit in which your body is both comfortable and settled, kind of settled down into your seat. Feel the connection with the seat under you and how it goes all the way down through the floor and down into the earth, a kind of steadiness. When you're ready, let your eyes close. Take a couple of deep breaths. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a little circle to let it find a simple upright. Let the shoulders relax, and the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight and strength of your body and how it rests deeply in the seat where you are on the earth. Let the belly be soft.

The breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion.

This meditation of mindfulness and loving kindness, this mindful loving awareness, is not a practice of developing or gaining or making something—although there are times when you can do that in meditation. But more fundamentally, it's an invitation to presence and deep listening.

So with this embodied awareness, begin to notice, feel, listen to how the body breathes itself, wherever you feel it. Coolness in the nostrils. Swirling, tingling at the back of the throat. Rise and fall of chest or belly. And if it's helpful, you can put your hand on your belly. Leave it there. Practice feeling the breath in the palm of your hand as you sit.

Following Thich Nhat Hanh's instruction, with each breath, if you wish, you can whisper *calm* or *ease*, inviting the mind to settle, the breath to come to greater ease.

And of course, there will be thoughts and memories, ideas and sensations and sounds. All the other things will arise. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel how the breath breathes itself in the middle of them all. Just breath.

As you quiet and sense, listen, feel the breath, you can also feel the mystery of the breath breathing itself. You don't have to do it. The earth is breathing you. You can relax. Gratitude to your breath, sustaining you.

Sense how it's breathing you with all the other field of life in this atmosphere. You're breathing with the trees around you and the raccoons and the gophers and the worms. And all the varied people in your neighborhood, on your planet—they're all breathing together. Let your breath gently just breathe. Let it breathe you and invite you to a steady, trusting presence. Just be here, this breath, now. Here and now. Rest in the presence. Calm and ease.

As you quiet down, as you let the mind settle, the breath settle in its own way, notice the state of your body. The meditation isn't primarily to fix yourself, but to listen, to attend with loving awareness, and feel the state of your body this very day in the spring. The ease, the pleasures and sweetness. And the stress and areas of tension—the shoulders and jaw and back and gut. Hold it all with loving awareness, with kindness, as if to say thank you to your body. *Thank you for caring so much. I'm okay just now. I'm meditating. You can relax and be at ease.*

And if your body has a message for you on this spring day, something to remember, what does it want to say? Listen. You can know.

Resting in the present moment with mindful, loving attention, the body breathes itself and you hold it all with kindness. Notice how your body responds—not trying to fix it, but held in the lap of kindness.

Just as you can sense and listen and feel what's happening in this body and breath, you can open the mindful loving awareness to your heart and to all that it carries. What is it carrying even now? Tears or grief, sadness or longing, sweetness, joy, love, frustration or fears, worry, anxiety. The heart carries so much—anger, overwhelm, tenderness, connection, desire. Notice all that the heart carries and wrap it with loving awareness and compassion. Not trying to fix or change or judge, but offering a tender attention that says *yes*, wrapped in kindness. *Thank you for caring so much, dear heart.*

You can relax. I'm meditating now. You can be at ease. Just now, I'm okay. You can rest. Thank you.

Notice what happens when you wrap the heart and all its feelings with kindness and compassion. Thank you. You can relax. I'm okay just now.

And if your heart has a message for you, something for you to remember or know, you can listen, you can hear, you can know.

Rest in the reality of the present—this mystery of a breathing body, a feeling heart. You are the mindful, loving awareness that notices it all. Rest in awareness itself. Relax. You are the kind and loving witness.

As the body breathes, the heart feels. As life moves through you, you are the consciousness, the awareness of it all—spacious, timeless, loving awareness itself. You are awareness.

And finally, there will be a message for you of how to respond to this beautiful and troubled world. What is your unique, best, beautiful response to be? With loving awareness, listen. What is your unique, singular, beautiful, caring, wise response? You can know.

And now, keeping that spirit of loving presence, let your eyes open gently, also carrying the messages you may have received from the body or the heart, or your inquiry. Stay quiet for a bit, just present and listening.

Welcome back. How was that meditation for you? It's good to sit together. A beautiful connection. A simple relief after the news. Coming back to my heart. Magic carpet. Coming back to compassion. My heart loosened. It doesn't take that long—settling into the knowing of the heart, calming, compassionate.

We already understand. We just need to take the time to listen.

So here we are. As I said, spring, renewal, Passover, Easter. It's also a difficult time out there. The polycrisis—climate difficulty, trade, immigration, continuing warfare in so many places. Growing racism, white supremacy. The loss of human rights for many people. These are also difficult. And we know it. We carry them in our heart.

Just as a little note for you: difficulties are inevitable. You happen to be incarnated in the human realm, and that's what we have—conflict and difficulty. But there's also a purpose in it, in some strange way.

And I remember my teacher Ajahn Chah asking us as monks, "When did you learn the most? When things were easy or when things were difficult? When did you learn the deep truths of impermanence and compassion and letting go of the things that need to be let go of and responding wisely? Where did you learn that?" And of course, almost everyone said it was through the difficulties.

So somehow central casting put you here on this planet and said, "Okay, school's open—time to learn." The question is not whether there's suffering, because there is, and some of it's really terrible, and it does want us to pay attention. But then the question is: How do we respond? We can take it into our body and then it becomes like PTSD. We get fear and anxiety, and it triggers fight, flight, or freeze—a kind of catastrophic thinking.

Or, with our practice, as Pablo Neruda, the great poet, said: "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." We can align our hearts with the forces of goodness and rebirth and blessings. My dear friend Joanna Macy, who died this last year—the great environmental sage and Buddhist teacher—calls this the Great Turning. Humanity has come to a point where the economic and political systems of exploitation, of exploiting the earth and exploiting one another, don't work anymore. Fostering more greed and hatred and ignorance no longer serves us. And collectively we can sense and feel and know our interdependence—that your breath and mine is also the breath of the rainforest and the kelp in the ocean. It's the breath of the icy Antarctic and the breath of the Sahara Desert and all that lives upon them.

When things are difficult, we can get triggered and go into a kind of survival brain of fight, flight, or freeze. We can get frozen, or we can get angry, or overwhelmed. The mind races to figure it out, because the work of your mind is to try to protect you. It thinks, "How do I protect? How do I fix?" And you can say thank you to your mind. "Thank you for trying to protect me. I know you're working overtime. It's okay. You can relax." And instead of worrying and rehashing, you can come into the present. Remember that *Be Here Now* book of Ram Dass? You can be here now.

Recently, I was invited to teach at a kind of seminar and gathering for ten thousand people in Ukraine who were seeking teachings and solace. I asked what it was they were looking for. It felt difficult to imagine how I could speak to them meaningfully when they were in the middle of so much suffering from the war. And they said, "We're overwhelmed. We've got fear and sometimes terror. We have tears and grief for the things we've lost, for the people we've known who've been killed. We're outraged, exhausted. We didn't want this war, and it's happening anyway. We feel guilt. Is it even okay to feel okay in the middle of this?"

And I talked to them about how they've lived through all this, but they don't necessarily need to take the war inside, to let the war take over their hearts. When Nelson Mandela walked out of Robben Island prison after twenty-seven years with so much magnanimity and compassion and graciousness, he changed the world. He said, "They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit."

I borrowed the moral authority of my teachers—Maha Ghosananda, who led fifteen years of peace walks through the killing fields, taking people back to their villages after a third of the population was killed in the civil war with the Khmer Rouge. And with each step they chanted together: "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law." And they chanted it again and again. I talked about the Dalai Lama losing Tibet, everything being destroyed—monasteries

torn down, sacred texts burned, monastics put in prisons, culture under attack. He said, "I've lost so much. They've taken so much. Why should I let them take my heart, take my peace of mind?"

So we talked about the courage it would take to remain an island of peace. To be that one person on the boat that Thich Nhat Hanh talks about, who's centered enough to help everyone around them survive. And we did practices to sweep through the body and drain out the tension, or to hold it with kindness and thank it and relax it. To place your fears in the lap of the Virgin Mary, which is the biggest belief in Ukraine, or to place them under a great tree and ask Mother Earth to hold them. To put your hand on the tree and feel its roots and your roots and the steadiness that has been there for a hundred and a thousand years. To breathe with compassion and mindfulness, to tend yourself, to feel all the other mothers and fathers, to imagine holding hands with them—doing it together, because you are. To sense the ancestors who survived in Ukraine and are now holding you and cheering you on.

As Gandhi said, when I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Remember this. Think of it. They always fall. And feel that you are living through something, but you get to be the zone of peace. You get to be the steady one, the heart that doesn't give up on compassion, that carries humanity.

So here we are practicing in our difficult time, learning to quiet our mind, settle the heart, tend. And as Nelson Mandela said, it's simple. Relax, breathe, tie your shoes and keep walking in the right direction. That is to say, live in the present. The people in Ukraine, if they go to the past, it upsets them terribly. And if they go to the future, it's also so uncertain. But you can live each moment here and now. And how you live now, today, this moment, creates what the future will be. You don't want to let fear take over your heart.

Part of what allows something beautiful to grow from this, when you get quiet and open and listen, is a curiosity. And you can sense it. There you are in a little conversation with someone around you. Let's not talk about Iran and Ukraine and Sudan and the Rohingyas and all the huge conflicts of the world and the tremendous suffering. It's also close to home. We know this as people. We get in conflict even with the people we love the most. Of course, my beloved Trudy and I would never have a conflict, but just in case it happens—the game is to take a mindful pause of breath, tune into yourself, and do two things.

First, ask yourself, what's my best intention? Just like you listen to your body and your heart in that meditation, the heart will speak to you. And when you feel your best or most loving intention, and it will arise, your whole demeanor and language change. Instead of trying to be right and solve it and be the person who really knew the correct thing, which makes the conflict, you see with the eyes of love and realize what matters is that we care about each other. Your tone of voice changes. Your best intention softens your body language.

And then the second thing, from that great intention, is the deep listening. Let's call it curiosity. So that you could say when somebody says something difficult to you, "What did you mean?" in a reactive way—or, with the eyes of care, you can say, "What did you mean? I want to understand." And those very same words have an entirely different valence and flavor and musical sound. Because that curiosity allows you to hear and sense what's really going on for that person. It's that listening heart that has the power to transform and change and open the channel so that we again remember who we are. A kind of deep listening, mindful, loving awareness.

And of course our politics right now fosters the opposite—fear and pain and confusion, fostering us to turn on one another. Thomas Merton put it this way, quite fitting for this week: Of what use is it to travel to the moon if we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from one another?

When my beloved Trudy went to work in the Darfur refugee camps in Africa, she worked with this great organization, iACT, a very small but mighty organization. Instead of the big NGOs that helicopter in with a plan and take over and do things, their very first move was to go and sit in circles, especially with the women in the camps, and listen to them and say, "What do you want? What do you need? What would serve you?" And they said, "Well, we need kindergarten and preschool for our kids. We want them to realize that they can learn and grow. And we want soccer." It was a surprise. Now iACT has for years helped build soccer teams in the camps. The women wanted that because they wanted their children not to give up hope, but to feel that they were part of a bigger world.

And now, in fact, the Darfur camps have a team that went, I think it was to Doha, for the Refugee World International Tournament, and the people in the camps were watching the TV for their Darfur teams to feel that they're not forgotten.

There's something so beautiful about pausing and listening—with one another, with the community around, with the people that are different from you. To the earth, to the beasts that live on it, as Chief Seattle would say, they all speak to you. They do. And if you listen, your heart knows.

One of my favorite stories is the account of Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba Bhave was the second most significant Gandhian teacher and figure in India after Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. And after he was assassinated, there was a great despair in the Gandhian nonviolent movement, even though India had gained its independence and Pakistan. They knew that there was still more to do in this nascent nation that had a lot of divisiveness.

After some time of mourning and disarray, they decided to have a big conference and bring together the Gandhian leaders to say, what should we do next? They invited Vinoba because he was the most senior figure after Mahatma Gandhi. And he demurred. He said, "You know, we can't replace Gandhi. He's not someone that we can just go and take over for." But they pressed him. They said, "We need to come together. We need to listen. We need to figure this out."

Eventually he said, "All right, I'll come. But only if you postpone it for a good part of a year so that I have time to walk there." And the conference was at the other side of the Indian subcontinent.

Vinoba set out with his walking stick and his sandals, much like Gandhi. He got to the first village, and each village more or less will have a kind of little square or a big tree at the center where people meet. He sat with the villagers there and said, "I want to hear what's happening for you." He chose to go into the poorest villages as Gandhi would have done. And they said, "It's terrible. We don't have very much money. We want to educate our children, but we don't have any land because we're called untouchables. We're cast aside and we work the land of others and we do the lowest jobs."

Vinoba listened. And kind of sadly at the circumstance, he didn't know what to do. So he said, "Let's meet again tomorrow." And he meditated and sat quietly. He had told them, "Well, maybe I'll go to see Nehru, who's the new prime minister who I know. Maybe I'll tell him about your plight." But in his heart, he felt that was really like a political move that wouldn't make much difference.

The next morning he said, "In the name of Gandhi, I hear what you say. I'm really listening. My tears come. And I want to find a way to help you."

And then a man stood up in the back and said, "I am one of those landowners of this village, a high caste Brahmin. And in the spirit of Gandhiji, I will give"—and there were fourteen of these villagers—"I'll give them each an acre of land. I'll give fourteen acres of my land, an acre apiece to each of them so that they will have their own plot to grow. And I will do it in honor of our new nation and Mahatma Gandhi." And those villagers all got land.

The next day, Vinoba walked to the village ahead and then another village, and brought together especially the poorest people in the village and listened deeply as he had, and heard the same kind of stories of despair and disempowerment. But now he had a story to tell. He said, "Well, in the last village, there were fourteen village families and they had nothing. And one of the Brahmin landholders offered land to each in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi." And sure enough, in the back, another Brahmin landholder said, "Well, I can do the same. There are twenty villagers here. I will give the twenty acres."

And Vinoba continued to walk. After months of village to village walking, he had collected several thousand acres of land for the poorest villagers on his way.

They met together, and that was the beginning of what was called the Bhoodan Land Reform Movement. The followers of Gandhi became so inspired that they began to walk from village to village with Vinoba and on their own. In the course of several years, they collected fourteen million acres of land from the wealthiest landowners for the very poorest. And it all happened because Vinoba sat and listened.

We need to listen to each other across all these divides. What are you afraid of? What are your longings? What's difficult? And to get quiet and ask, what's my best intention? The heart always answers: to know, to love, to be connected, to serve.

I remember when my twin brother was in the hospital in Boston. He was at Dana-Farber, and he was dying of blood cancer. I spent a long time in that hospital with him, as did my other brothers. What was striking was all the other families that had come, families who had a member with cancer. They'd come from all around the world. It was like we became a family, all of us, carrying the caring for those who were sick, in danger, dying. We held hands together. This is us.

When we quiet the mind and listen to the heart, the truths are so obvious. Yes, the first noble truth—there is suffering and its causes: greed, fear, hatred, ignorance. The more greed and hatred, the more suffering. But the opposite of greed is generosity. The opposite of hatred is love. The opposite of ignorance is wisdom. These are our human birthright. These are possible. And we know it. We can feel it.

Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the deep truth, and you know it in your heart. Or as Mark Twain said, kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

We get overwhelmed and think it's not possible. How will we get through this? But we always do, as Gandhi said. And every being, in spite of their deeds and their attitudes, likes to be treated with respect. Every being. It's the great courage and currency and strength of the heart. You feel it.

I was in Dharamsala this fall and got to meet with the Dalai Lama. Most mornings of the week, there's a line of a couple hundred or more Tibetan people, all dressed in their finest with their children and their silk, waiting to see His Holiness. He sits there with some of his attendants, and they slowly go by, and he blesses each one. The feeling you get—and of course, I got a little bit of time with him—is that no matter what, whoever comes, he meets them with respect and care and dignity, whoever they are. You see them all as they walk away in this long line, smiling like they've been touched by the sun. And it's really the sun of love, of respect.

We can do that. It's a kind of humility—not to put ourselves over someone or to judge them, but to be still, to not react, to listen. Then we'll know what the right action is. And to trust the uncertainty, because in fact, often we don't know.

Of course, I'm one of those people—my wife would certainly second this—the Kornfield brothers like to be in charge and think they know what they're doing. She's happy to point that out. But the truth is, we don't know. I don't know.

This was one of Ajahn Chah's favorite teachings. We'd ask him different questions, and he'd say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" What should we do in this circumstance? He'd smile. "It's uncertain, isn't it?" Well, tell us about enlightenment. He'd laugh. "It's uncertain, isn't it?"

And he was so comfortable with the wisdom of insecurity and uncertainty, just being where we are—not with our fixed ideas, but in the living presence, this moment, with love.

So there's a kind of trust in which you bring your humanity to this world. And that trust is also a trust in the mystery. And the mystery is everything. The fact that we exist, that there's blue sky and blue water and brown earth and mountains and trees and kangaroos. Come on, where did the kangaroos come from? This is crazy. Where does it all come from? Don't know. It's uncertain, isn't it? But it's a lot bigger than our ideas.

It's really the wonderful—I believe it's Mary Oliver's phrase—"I was a bride married to amazement." The wonderful mystery of it.

John Neihardt, who was an anthropologist and writer about the Native American tradition, became close to the great elder Black Elk. Many of you have read Neihardt's book, *Black Elk Speaks*. The last chapter tells of how Black Elk took his final hike up Harney Peak. Harney Peak was where Black Elk had the vision of the great hoop of humanity and how we were all interconnected, how the native people had this truth that was medicine for the world.

The Sioux holy man explained to Neihardt that when death approached, a Lakota could climb this sacred mountain to see if the Great Spirit approved of his life, and rain would fall on those who had the Great Spirit's blessing. As a young man, Black Elk's vision told him how to save his people and homeland in spite of the armies and settlers that came. And in many ways, he was afraid he had failed.

On the day of this last climb, Black Elk was an old man. He dressed in red long johns, moccasins, war paint, and a feathered headdress. Slowly, laboriously, he climbed to the summit, oblivious to the tourists who stared at him. Neihardt teased him that he should have picked a day with at least one cloud in the sky, but Black Elk rebuked him, saying the rain would have nothing to do with the weather.

At the top of the peak, not far from the tourists, the old man laid down under blue sky. And to his astonishment, Neihardt watched a few small clouds form over Black Elk, and a soft rain began to fall. Black Elk wept with relief. He felt that even though he'd not succeeded in fulfilling his whole vision, the Great Spirit was recognizing he had done his best.

Your life is not separated from the earth and the sun and the stars. It's held by all of it. Your breath is held by the winds that touch the Andes, that touch the mountains of Switzerland and the mountains of China, and all the beings of this world breathing with you together.

So the listening heart, the loving awareness that you are, comes with a kind of trust—that there's something to learn, something to see, something great—and you're invited to hold it with tenderness and wisdom and care, no matter what. And in the midst of despair, in the throes of despair, the instruction is to bring your humanity to it. Sometimes it only takes a little loving awareness at the right time for things to change.

Here's a story for you.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a tiny mouse asked a wild dove.

"Nothing more than nothing," came the answer.

"In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story. I sat on the branch of a fir tree close to its trunk when it began to snow," said the mouse. "Not a blizzard, no, just like in a dream—soft snow without a sound or violence. And having nothing better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and the small sticks of my branch. Eventually the number came to 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you might say—the branch broke off."

Having said that, the mouse went away. And the dove, an authority on this since the time of Noah, thought for a time and said to herself, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice, one person's presence lacking for peace to come about on this earth."

So you listen. You add your voice and heart with your humanity, with your care, with your sensitivity. We're all going through it—suffering, pleasure, joy, all of it. Keep your heart strong. You can do this. You've been training for this for a long time. You have all your years of learning and growing, and certainly your meditation practice. You've been training how to be in this world.

And as the Buddhist texts say, even when others are cruel, we shall not be cruel. We shall be kind. Thus we will incline our heart. Even though others might steal and take what's not theirs, we shall be generous.

Thus we shall incline our heart. Even when others speak falsehoods and untruths, we will speak truthfully and kindly. Thus we will incline our hearts. Others may be arrogant—we will be sensitive, humble. Thus we will incline our heart. And even though others may lack wisdom, we shall cultivate understanding. Thus we will incline our heart.

You have been training in steadiness, in compassion. And in difficult times, you become the bodhisattva—the being dedicated to bringing something better into this world, something beautiful, something wise. What better thing is there to do?

As the Dalai Lama says, the only real joy is to make a difference in this world. Raising beautiful children, making a conscious business, standing up for justice. You quiet the mind, listen to the heart, and become still until the right action arises for you.

This listening is a kind of courage. It's like Gandhi being silent one day a week, waiting to listen for what the most effective thing would be that he could do—the march to the sea to take a little bit of salt, standing up for those who were oppressed against the racism and cruelty of the caste system.

Trudy was saying that in Africa, people don't ask how you are. At least she found this in several places. They ask, "How is your family?" What a beautiful greeting. It shows how connected we are. And it is also an invitation to listen. So you listen, and then you know you can touch the fabric of humanity where you can reach and mend that part. You can offer yourself. You stand up for justice. You listen to those who don't have a voice. You listen to those who are different than you, who are in your own mind very different and maybe reviled or judged by others. And you say, "Let me understand you." What a beautiful phrase—let me understand. That is real courage.

Lewis Mumford said a person with courage never needs weapons, but they may need bail. So you stand up in whatever way is right for you.

Carrying on from Thomas Jefferson, who said one person with courage is a majority—I had on my refrigerator for years a picture from around the time of Tiananmen Square. A line of tanks coming down the street in China, and one man who was coming back from the market, standing in the middle of the street with two shopping bags, one in each hand, gazing at the tanks coming and just standing there. And the tanks had stopped.

How is your family? It turns out that if you open the family circle, it's all of us.

So offer your heart. Listen to your body, your breath, your life, the community around you. There's something holy in all this. And your loving attention is part of what's holy. It's a great gift.

I think about the song by Leonard Cohen that so many of us know, where he talks about the holy or the broken, hallelujah. "Even though it all went wrong, I stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah."

We get to be the ones. You get to be the Dalai Lama. You get to be the Kuan Yin of your family and neighborhood and culture—to carry the great heart, or to remember it, because everyone has it. But you get to let it shine quietly, humbly at times, listening deeply with the eyes of mercy for everyone.

This is who you are.

And on that page I read this: "The world only changes when we envision the transformation we wish to see. The task for us is to imagine another way and shepherd it into being."

It makes me think—is it possible that we need to write a new myth? One that emphasizes joy and happiness? I mean, we've all learned from suffering. There's no doubt that there's suffering in the world. But could we steer the focus of our thinking more toward the joy and happiness that exists here too?

I know I've mentioned this to you before, but I go to Homeboy Industries. I was there this past week, and they focus entirely on loving each other. What they've accomplished there is just remarkable. These men and women who've been in prison, who've done prison-worthy things—they're now running businesses and having happy families. And it all comes from love, which you talk about so much. I just feel like... let's write new myths. Let's write about how we learn through forgiveness and love and happiness and joy and dancing. Instead of only learning through suffering, let's create more and more myths of transformation through love.

So Nancy, first of all, I see your smile. I feel the joy. I have, of course, been to Homeboy Industries, and Father Greg Boyle is one of my great heroes, someone I deeply admire, because he loves people. He's like Ram Dass. I once asked Ram Dass, "What do you do?" He said, "I love everybody." And Father Greg does exactly that. He does it in the midst of what has been a great deal of suffering in the community around him, and he becomes a light.

So I want to invite you to close your eyes. Because I'm listening to you and receiving this message of joy, and I want you to feel it in your own body. Tell me how you feel it, what it's like.

I'm still a little stirred up...

Keep your eyes closed. It's okay. Feel the excitement—all that energy. Now imagine that it's joy. Joy is bubbling. All that excitement and energy.

I can feel a release.

Yes, there's a relief and a beauty in it.

Yeah.

And now—you came on and told us some beautiful things. There's one more thing you want to say directly to all of us, from this joy and this bubbling up and all this energy. What does your heart most want to say to us all?

Let's create myths where we really, truly envision the world as a place of happiness and love and cherishing.

So we receive that from you. We take it in. Let's change the story. Yes, there's suffering, but there's something much bigger. And let's change it so that we can live that.

Yeah.

And I was thinking—we can say there's eighteen thousand joys and two thousand sorrows. There is. There's joy everywhere. Every blade of grass is singing, saying, "Hey, I love the sunlight. I'm going to make sugar out of light." That's a miracle. "I'm going to turn light into sugar."

And we're going to take what you turn, what you offered, into joy. So thank you. Thank you. Really, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you do for the world.

For those who have never read *The Book of Joy*, the dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu—they're teasing each other and the Dalai Lama is grabbing Tutu's hat. Then Tutu says, "What's with the big nose, Dalai Lama?" And they just laugh at each other and say, "We're holy men. We're supposed to sit up and act holy," but they tease each other. And they carry that spirit of joy into the world. I can't recommend *The Book of Joy* more than any other book to speak to just what Nancy said.

A student who had just attended a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock shared her experience. She said, "It was my third long retreat, and I notice now that when I'm around a lot of people, there's always a little judging mind coming up. And what I found, finally what I did is—oh, there's my cousin over there. Oh yeah, there's my niece doing that funny thing. Oh, my old uncle is over there and has to grunt a little bit when they sit down. I had so much more compassion when I would think about the other people in the room. We're all seventy people in silence, right?"

They're family. They're all related. They're all family.

She continued, "Coming out of the retreat, I made an intention that anybody I have interaction with, I want to be loving and accepting to them. This morning I was in the hardware store and I saw this beautiful young man just dusting the metal things, and I said, 'Oh, you're doing a good job,' and he smiled. I asked if he celebrated the weekend, just making little conversation. It opens up the world."

This is really beautiful. I'm glad she had that long sit. And what I feel as she talks is that the practice she did for days and days and days—it's still pouring out of her as this love and care for everybody she runs into.

Close your eyes just for a second. Not much to do, but feel it. Feel how the retreat opened this heart of yours to see everyone as your family, as your children, as your nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters of the world. How big is that love? It's huge. It's huge. You may not always like them, but you love them anyway.

So feel it. Feel how big it is. That's the same thing Mother Teresa said when she said the problem is you draw your family circle too small. And now you open your family circle and look around at all the people here—all these wonderful people looking back at you. And they're all your family. Send them your metta and your love as you look at them. That's what you're sharing. And it's gorgeous.

That's right. Thank you, Jack. Thank you, Mimi. Thank you so, so much. Thank you for your art and your practice.

Well, this is fun. We've had joy and love. Let's see what comes next. Suffering's okay too. It's all good.

Alice. Oh, well. Hi, Jack.

Oh, hi, Alice.

I just wanted to say hello to you. I remember when we sat in Yucca Valley at the Institute of Mental Physics. That was way before Spirit Rock. And I will always, always remember you saying, "All you need to do in life is meditate and sweep the garden. And it does not matter how large the garden is."

Yes. So how have you been since then? That was like the 1970s or 80s. How's it going?

Well, since then, I'm in the school of Ridhwan, Diamond Heart, and I've been doing that practice with Hamid for about thirty years now.

Yes.

So life has really transformed. I'm now eighty-one. Were you born in forty-five as well?

Yes.

Yeah, I thought so. We're the same. I turned eighty-one last Monday.

Happy birthday.

Oh, thank you, Jack. Thank you. And my husband has Alzheimer's and he is in twenty-four-hour care. And I could not—I could not accept this if I didn't really have a meditation practice and also the work that I'm receiving with Diamond Heart.

So let's pause for a moment. First, I'm hearing your decades of practice—meditation and the Diamond Heart work, which is this spiritual, psychological, inner work. And then you were given, in this phase of our life—we're in our eighties—okay, people around us get Alzheimer's or they get other things. They get leukemia or cancer of other kinds or multiple sclerosis or all kinds of things. And here you are, and you say, "Oh, I'm so glad I have a practice that helps me hold all of this together, that I wouldn't have been able to accept it." What in your practice—close your eyes for a moment. We're just tuning in. What is it that's most helped you to get through and accept and stay well? And even you seem to have a really beautiful spirit. What helped you most?

The realization, Jack, that I could not do this without my community and my tribe.

So feel that. Feel how you are woven with your community and your tribe. And how much love there is in that.

Yes, yes, yes.

And I can just feel them holding both me and my husband Ron in their hearts and in their hands.

Yes.

And as you do this, now I want you to extend that, because some of the people on the screen here have a community and tribe, but some of us are also isolated. And so I want you to hold them as if they're part of your family. You know, as Bibi said, we're all family. And imagine that you are sharing that love and that support, even in this kind of mysterious way that we hold each other in our hearts, even if you don't live nearby or know each other personally or individually—that we're in this together. We're practicing together. We share this. And feel all the love, the courage, the grace that comes of feeling connected.

How is this?

Well, it's really interesting, Jack, because I can remember sitting in Yucca Valley and Joseph and you and the other teachers talking about how we're all connected. And I don't know that I've ever really felt that until now.

Isn't that fascinating? That is so fascinating. Well, stay with it because it's a really beautiful understanding and realization.

I will. Can I ask you one question? Do you know how Carol Wilson is? I used to work with her in Yucca Valley and I haven't connected with her in decades.

She's fine. I'll say that. She's doing okay. I'm happy to say. She's traveling now. I think she's in Europe. She's quite fine.

Okay, and is she still back at Barre?

Yeah, she might be there or she might be East Coast or Europe, but she's in California some of the time and she's fine. And that's beautiful because you're asking about someone who was your teacher. And we've had so many teachers, you know, and so we've been blessed.

So thank you, dear. And I love the fact that you're feeling that connection. And then in some way, we're all in that big tent of making it part of our family.

Absolutely. Absolutely.

So let's come back to a little meditation collectively together.

We sat and meditated and offered our thanks to our breath and body and our hearts and all they carry. Thank you. We rest in loving awareness, our true nature, consciousness itself, the loving witness, and feel the freedom of this even now.

We listened to some stories and teachings of things that we already know. Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed—the ancient eternal law. We listened to the stories of the freedom of the heart and what it means to listen and care for one another as family. To listen deeply, kindly.

We heard from others in our tribe about joy, happiness, stepping out of the judging mind and seeing everyone as your brother and sister and niece and nephew and beloveds, and sensing the community that you are inevitably a part of, that you're woven into.

And here we are. This is the big heart.

Rest in the loving awareness. Trust in the mystery and the connection. Take time to quiet your mind. Listen with your heart.

Thank you. Good night.

CHAPTER 60

Identity and Freedom

Jack Kornfield · 1h03

> *In this evening dharma talk from a fall retreat at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield weaves together personal reflections from visiting his twin brother at a cancer institute with profound teachings on identity and liberation. He explores how the Buddha's teachings invite us to discover that we are not the body that ages, nor the thoughts and emotions that arise and pass, but rather the timeless awareness that witnesses all experience.*
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> *Kornfield draws on the Aṅguttara Nikāya and Saṃyutta Nikāya to illuminate the ephemeral nature of phenomena, comparing this world to "a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud." He shares the pivotal teaching his teacher Ajahn Chah received from Ajahn Mun: to turn attention from the contents of experience back to "the one who knows"—consciousness itself. The talk traces how each aspect of the Buddhist path—dāna (generosity), sīla (virtue), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom)—invites a shift of identity from grasping and separation to freedom and interconnection.*
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> *Practical guidance emerges throughout: how to work with pain, boredom, restlessness, fear, and the judging mind through naming and holding experience with loving awareness. Kornfield emphasizes that difficult experiences are not obstacles but opportunities to discover that we are the spacious awareness that can hold all things. The talk concludes with a call to recognize our true nature as loving awareness itself—the transformation that the world most needs.*

As I was walking up the hill to come here this evening to give the talk, I could see a couple of bright planets just near the horizon. There's that sweet turning right before the sitting when we're in that liminal period between day and night, and the light becomes mysterious and magical. This beautiful valley here at Spirit Rock, which holds us, becomes a place where we can step out of the ordinary thrall and busyness of our life and listen in a deeper way.

Every wise culture in the world knows that there are times to go into the mountains or go to the ocean or go out in the desert or someplace where you can listen to your heart, listen to your body, listen to a rhythm that's bigger and deeper than the internet, and escape for a short time the madness of politics. You are so lucky. It's all happening out there, and there's no news, I want to assure you. It's all the same.

But the question when we come on retreat is not so much the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. Are we connected to something that is timeless and great, that gives us an understanding of how to live in this mysterious life we've been given? Tonight I want to continue the conversation on identity and build on what Trudy spoke of—the wood wide web and the deepening of your presence and working with the breath. I'll also speak about the great matter, as it's called in Zen.

I just came back from Dana-Farber, the wonderful cancer institute connected with Harvard Medical School, being with my twin brother who's doing a bit better, but it's still difficult, dangerous. I was surrounded by a lot of bald-headed people who weren't monks and nuns. Their families and kids and older people and middle-aged, all there together. And I started to do metta for everybody. Metta for those who are sick. Metta for those who are caring for them and their families. Metta for the nurses and the attendants and the doctors and everyone who has to attend people in this particular healing environment—or in this environment where people don't heal.

The Buddha put it this way in the Anguttara Nikaya: it seems as though although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not. It's very stark there to see it. But this is actually this mysterious human life we've been given, which is finite. And then what do we do with it? How do we live in it wisely? Clearly, there are some questions that can't be answered by Google.

The question of identity is at the heart of much spiritual tradition. Kalu Rinpoche, a wonderful, great old Tibetan master, said: You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this, or you forget it. When you understand, you will see that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

Or like Nisargadatta, the sage that I studied with in Bombay, who put it differently, the same expression: Wisdom says I am nothing, love says I am everything. Between these two, my life flows.

So who are we? The Buddha spoke about liberation and offered his own experience of freedom, the liberated heart and mind, to all. He said this liberation allows you to move through the world without clinging, without grasping, without being entangled to the things in this world. And why should we learn this? The Buddha went on with these phrases: This world is like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. It's ephemeral. Yesterday was here and it's gone. Remember Y2K? Gone. Back with the dinosaurs, back with the pyramids. Things

arise, they exist, and then they're gone, like that. Yesterday, your hard day for some of you meditating—it's gone. Today, maybe hard, maybe not—gone. Here we have the present as it is, and things arise and then they dissolve like that.

Again, here is the Buddha describing this from the Samyutta Nikaya: Suppose a man or woman who was not blind beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges River as they floated along

and carefully examined them, and they would appear to him as empty, unreal, insubstantial. In exactly the same way does the meditator behold bodily phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, states of consciousness. As they arise and examining them carefully, they appear to them to be empty, insubstantial, void, without a self.

And the good news of this is not that it's a particular philosophy or something that you have to believe. This is really a science of the heart that you get to experiment with yourself. My teacher Ajahn Chah said, of course there are dozens of meditation techniques, but it all comes down to this: just let it be. Step over here where it's cool. Step out of the battle. Why not give it a try? That's his immediate description of the Buddha's freedom offered to all that he encountered.

Now the question is, hearing these lovely teachings, how do we do it?

When Ajahn Chah had practiced for the first eight or nine years in the forest, he got some instruction from teachers who lived in caves and out in the jungle with the tigers and all the wildness of the tradition of the forest monks. He had visions and insights and samadhi states. Then he went to see the greatest master of the time, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun. After paying his respects, he described all of his meditation. He said, "I had this insight, my body dissolved into light, I had this vision and these states and understanding."

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Chah, you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. Experiences just arise and pass. They're like movies—a romantic movie, a comedy, a war movie, a documentary. You've all seen a lot of movies, haven't you?" He said, "Those are the movies. But the only way that you will really understand is to turn your attention from the screen, from the contents of thoughts and feelings and the movies and the states, back to the one who knows, back to the knowing itself, which is consciousness. Turn your attention back and become the witnessing, become the one who knows the experience rather than being lost or caught in each experience that arises and passes."

Now you already understand this in some deep way, because what I want to talk about tonight is in fact your own birthright, your own true nature. You understand it in the most simple way when you go and look in the mirror and notice you've aged. Face it—fur is getting lost in some parts and growing in other parts. As Wes says, the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. It wrinkles and it sags and it spots and it does all that stuff. You notice you've aged. But the weird thing is, you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? It's quite common.

That's because in the moment of looking in the mirror, you see the body, which ages from being an infant to a toddler to a child, adolescent to young adult and up through middle age and old age. The body exists in time. It grows like a plant and then it fades and dies. But the consciousness that sees, that observes—that's outside of time. And so in that moment, it's like you're looking at your body and saying, "Hmm, aged, hasn't it? How interesting." As if you're looking at your human incarnation and saying, "Oh, where are we now? Let's see, three quarters of the way through, maybe if I'm lucky." Something like that. How's it going in your incarnation?

And the gift is that you're not so identified with this body and mind as the Buddha described—the thoughts and perceptions and feelings.

Here's a poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Yo no soy yo.* I am not I. I'm this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk. The one who forgives sweet when I hate. The one who takes a walk when I am indoors. The one who will remain standing when I die.

He's really talking about a timeless spirit or consciousness that was born into your body.

I mean, who do you think you are? The lentils and beet soup that you had—that's what you are? Come on. Who are you really?

And when you don't identify or grasp, there comes a happiness, a joy, a lightness, and an ease. You can move through the world, but in a different way—in a liberated way.

This shift of identity is described in the first teachings of the Buddha, in the turning of the wheel, where he describes the noble truth: there is suffering. Anybody not have that, by the way? Okay, you could have your money back, but apparently... There's cause to suffering—greed, hatred, attachment, confusion. And there's an end of suffer-

ing. There's a path to the end of suffering, sometimes called the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought or right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

The path is summed up—this beautiful path to the end of suffering—sometimes as *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*: virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Or sometimes it's summed up as *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*: generosity, virtue, and mental cultivation. But it all describes a way to live in the world—not to remove yourself from the world, because you can't—but to live in the world without being caught by it.

This means you have to hold two realities at the same time. You have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number and zip code. You have to hold the paradox in that way. And the Buddha begins: O nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember that your true nature is liberation itself. And then each of these trainings is a way to shift identity from being caught in a small sense of self to being free.

Dāna, which means generosity, the first of those qualities—when you become generous, what happens is that you shift your identity from mine and me and grasping, from the small sense of self, and you expand who you are to share with others. It's a really beautiful thing to be able to do this. It's actually a shift of the sense of being separate to being engaged and connected with something much larger.

As Ram Dass used to say, you're just an accountant in the firm anyway. You don't own this stuff. It's like this very wealthy man who died, and somebody was saying, "Gosh, how much did he leave?" And the other person said, "Well, everything, of course." That's how much you leave.

Sharon Salzberg was describing walking along the street in Seattle when a somewhat disheveled homeless person came up to her looking for money, gazed at her, and pleaded, "Don't you know me?" She said it just stopped her in her tracks. First she went through the normal files—do I know this person? Did they come to a retreat with me? Because it could have been. But then she realized that wasn't it. It was a deeper question. Don't you know me? I'm one of you. I'm part of you. Can you help me? Can we share together?

When you go to traditional Buddhist societies in Thailand, Burma, India, and places in East Asia and China, there is so much generosity connected with Buddhist practice. It's really beautiful. There's tentative giving, they describe, and then brotherly or sis-

terly giving—don't you know me, here, share with this. And then there's royal giving, in which you feel, as Rumi writes, "Walking out of the treasury, I feel generous. On a spring day, how can you not give things away?"

I remember being in very poor villages fifty years ago as a monk during the dry season, not a lot of food. People would come out and they would be so devoted in offering it. It was as if they were saying, "We so value what you represent—the spirit of freedom that you represent as a monk—that we'll give of the little food we have because you buoy up our spirit." It was just the most beautiful thing, to have people take the preciousness of what they had and say, won't you share this too?

Do you know anybody who's generous who isn't happy? Really generous, where that doesn't make happiness? There's a way in which generosity invites your nobility, your Buddha nature you could call it, your true nature, to shift from the small self to say, "It's us." It's what Trudy talked about last night in the description of the trees—how they were, through their roots, feeding not only their babies but sick trees. The trees were taking care of one another.

And that beauty... Larry Brilliant, who's a friend and was one of the people in the WHO who helped to eradicate smallpox—which is an astonishing thing, by the way, because 500 million people died of smallpox in the 20th century. It's hard to believe it was the number one, or one of the number one killers, and terrible deaths. And it's been eradicated.

He said in the last villages that they went to, in these remote villages in Asia, the people didn't want to be inoculated. They believed that smallpox was brought on by the gods for some reason, and you couldn't stop it. So they had to forcibly inoculate the last villages. He said, "We went to this last village, forcibly inoculated the people. They resisted. The village headman, as soon as they were all inoculated, said, 'Bring out the food. These people are our guests.'" And they picked what they had, the little bit they had in their garden, and they made a feast. Because even if you did, he said, what we believe the gods told us you should not do, and you were listening to some other gods, you are still the guests in our village. Imagine that.

So generosity means shifting your identity to something greater. And so does the next step, *dāna-sīla*—virtue—which we talked about in the beginning of the retreat. Simple precepts: to not kill, not steal, not lie, not misuse sexuality, intoxicants, things like that. It's pretty simple. It's hard to meditate after a day of killing and stealing, right? It doesn't work terribly well.

But more than that, it means a shift from greed and ignorance and being caught in things—because that's what you're caught in when you hate or when you kill or when you steal. You're caught in those powerful forces, and releasing those means shifting your identity from the fear and the grasping to one of reverence for life. Both outwardly, but also inwardly. How do you treat yourself? To care for others and not belittle yourself.

As you act with integrity, the true spirit of integrity is a growing of the heart and mind. It's a kind of freedom. It's a shift of identity. Thomas Jefferson said, "One man or woman with courage is a majority." And that just touches me when I hear it. It means that any human being who's willing to stand up for what really matters in their being can change everything.

So there's a beauty and again a shift of identity invited in this practice of *sīla*, of integrity. From being caught in the things of this world to discovering that you are free to act with your conscience no matter what the circumstances.

I have this story from Ada Shibley, who was a peacemaker working between Palestine and Israel with different peace groups. She was trying to bring a group of people from Palestine to meet with Israeli counterparts, and particularly this wonderful fellow named Ishmael, who'd gone through losses in his family, had been in prison, but became a great peacemaker. They got to the border crossing, and on their little minibus, a woman who was a soldier came on and said, "Give me your IDs. Oh, you're an Arab. You're a Palestinian. You can't come through this point. You've got to go two hours north and do this, and maybe they'll let you through."

They were on their way to a really important conference that they'd been working for weeks to arrange, bringing these parties together. Ada knew if Ishmael separated from the group, he'd never get in. She was really upset by it. The soldier said, "Get out, you don't have your papers," quite angrily. They were shocked.

And then Ada says, "I looked at this soldier and I saw a woman, a young woman with a uniform covering her youthful, beautiful body. And under her military hat, I saw long black hair tied in a ponytail." And with sharpness, the soldier kept saying, "No, get out. He needs to go to the other checkpoint."

She moved one way, and her hair moved differently. And I started listening to her hair. I didn't judge the human being standing in front of her. I just paused for a while and told her what we were doing. And I said, "Can you find any way to help us? I know the situation is really complicated. I can see that you want to help." Isn't that beautiful?

And somehow in this opening, she sort of moved her gun aside a little bit and said, "See that gate over there? If he walks slowly there and crosses through it, then he can come over and meet your bus on the other side in five minutes." And I said, "Thank you so much." And I told her more about the peace work we were trying to do, and we talked for a while.

And then she said, "I hate this. I hate going home to my mother who's feeding me, and I'm a soldier with a gun, and I can hardly let go of being a soldier. I can't smile." And I became curious. I wanted to ask her about her hair. I was convinced it had its own language. She said, "It's my reminder that I'm a woman. I'm born into life to love. I tend to forget this under this uniform, and I've forgotten how to smile. There's so much suffering I've seen. But then my hair slaps my face. It blows and reminds me I'm a woman. No one can bury this fact under any uniform. So when I'm out of here, I will work for peace like you." And now she was speaking the same language, and her hair was soft and calm.

There's something about our human possibility in which we can be caught up in hate and greed and so forth. And then the teachings invite us to step out of that and to find a truer, freer, bigger heart in the circumstance. It's a shift of identity.

After dāna and sīla comes bhāvanā—cultivation. And it's sometimes divided into two parts or several parts. In this case: sīla, samādhi, and paññā. Samādhi means concentration. And so here you're sitting and walking for the first couple of days, and you may have noticed that the attention is a bit scattered. Yes?

Albert Einstein put it this way. He said—and this was in Scientific American, by the way, it's not an internet artifact—"If you can drive safely while kissing a girl, you're simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves." And this is really talking about the way we get so lost in electronics. I mean, I'm sorry for you. For our teen retreats, the big moment at the start is when they have to turn in the part of their anatomy that's made by Apple, basically. It's an amazing thing. Who will I be without Instagram and Snapchat, all my friends, and so forth? But you're the victims in a certain way of it as well.

And you sit and you begin to practice, and there comes a shift of identity from the torrent of thoughts that Trudy and West described, from the torrent of emotions, and you begin to let yourself get calmer and clearer, quiet the mind a bit.

Here is a letter written by David Armitage:

"Some years ago, I attended a rigorous six-year academic program at one of the famous colleges in Boston that required me to work during the day, take my classes at night, and do piles of homework on the weekends. On the first summer off, I wanted to get far away from these studies and work with my hands close to the earth, so I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me, and I decided to do it again the next summer.

That year, I drove from Boston to Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend. The roads were crowded. A close friend had just died. The trip took hours and hours, and by the time I arrived, just before dusk, I was exhausted and anxious. My Amish host had delayed dinner for me. During the meal, I tried to act natural, but I felt full of nerves."

My host could clearly tell something was amiss, because at the end of dinner he said, "Come with me." I followed him to their backyard, which bordered on an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gambled about while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa, and I did the same.

The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. The sky was peach at the horizon and deep blue higher up. Stars began to appear. And then, out of the alfalfa, rose fireflies. A few at first, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars—heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. My nervousness left me. The farmer turned and said, "That's for you."

And this is for you—to come here, to walk among the trees and among these hills, to step out of the busy rounds of your life and let yourself begin to quiet your mind and open your heart so that you can live in a freer and different way.

Samadhi means to calm and steady the mind, to concentrate. But the way that it works, as Trudy talked about last night, is not through striving and tension, but through a dedication or devotion that is both relaxed—here's the key—concentration grows when you are both relaxed and alert, relaxed and present.

Some people, new or even more experienced practitioners, will go on a concentration retreat. Those who practice for a while often find, "This really helped me to just focus on concentration for a while. It steadied me." Others find that there's so much else going on that if they try to concentrate too much in the first days, with all the other things arising, they're struggling against their experience. They need to open their field of attention and just be more mindful of everything. But over these days you will get more concentrated. You will be more present with the breath and body and what arises. And you want to do it gently.

As Julia Child said in her instructions, if you're in the kitchen and you drop the lamb, you can just pick it up. It's the same thing with the breath and your attention. You're there, you're paying attention, your attention goes off a thousand times. It's the very coming back with relaxed ease and dedication that matters. And in concentration, you want to start looking for those moments of ease, of joy, of simplicity—the little half smile that Wes invited you to this morning. Little by little, you start to have these moments where you realize, "Oh, a moment of ease. Two moments of ease. Some sense of joy." We have this negativity bias; we're always looking for problems. But in concentration, you actually want to tune yourself to the glimmers, the beginnings of wellbeing, and let them get nurtured. Concentration grows from trust, spaciousness, practice, and dedication. Little by little, the mind will settle in quiet.

Dana, sila, samadhi, panna—wisdom and mindfulness. So here you are, sitting, walking, mindfully eating on a good day when you're lucky. And the instructions from the Buddha are this: "My friends, there is a most wonderful way for living beings to realize purification, overcome grief and sorrow, end pain and anxiety, travel the true path, and realize liberation of heart and mind. And this is the establishment of mindfulness, mindful awareness."

Establishing mindfulness, the practitioner remains mindful of the body, mindful of feelings, mindful of the mind, and mindful of all the dharmas—of all the relations between things that arise and pass. Sitting, walking, standing, and lying down are all opportunities, the Buddha goes on to say, to practice this liberating quality of mindfulness. This is what we're doing here. And we're calling it also loving awareness—putting mindfulness and metta together.

So you're sitting here feeling the breath, and then after three breaths or five breaths or however long it happens to be, the attention goes elsewhere. What to do when it goes elsewhere? If you're not just devoted in that sitting to concentrating on the breath—which you can be, especially in these first days—you want to allow yourself to shift and receive, with the same careful attention you give to the breath, the other strong experience that's pulled your attention away.

Maybe it's pain in the body. How do you touch the pain that's in your body? With fear? With aversion? Do you tense around it with the desire to get it to go away, to try to fix it? That's our kind of normal strategy, isn't it? But the fact is that you have joy and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Anybody not have these? It's part of the human incarnation ride that you get. We all have it.

So then the question is: Can we be present? Can the identity begin to shift so we're not battling our experience or fighting it, but rather holding it with loving awareness?

And that means when there's pain there, the things you can do are to name it: tightness, throbbing, fire, fire, pain, pain. And to hold it with loving awareness the way you would hold a sick child, maybe, or a child that's crying. You've fed them and diapered them and done all the things, and they're still crying. What do you do? You pick them up, you hold them, and after a while they settle down. With loving awareness, when there's pain or difficulty in the body, you turn your attention to it, receive it with that mindful, spacious attention, and hold it kindly.

And then one of three things will happen. It'll soften and get easier. It'll stay the same, or it will get worse. That's not your job. Yours is to be the loving awareness itself.

Frank Ostaseski, who helped found the Zen Center Hospice, writes about a fellow he worked with who asked if Frank could teach him to meditate. He was in a lot of pain and he was in the last weeks of his life. He had stomach cancer. And it wasn't usually Frank's habit to teach dying people how to meditate, but he said, okay, we'll give it a try. So he oriented his attention toward the painful sensations, except that as soon as he tried to go to the painful sensations, it was too much for him. He started screaming, "I can't, it's too much. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts." Frank said, "Okay, let's try something else." And he put his hand on the man's stomach and said, "How's that?" Very gently, lovingly. He said, "Oh, that hurts too much." Frank said, "Okay." And he put his hands a foot or two away. "How's that?" He said, "Oh, it still hurts." "Okay." And he put his hands way out, made this big field around his body, still kind of focusing on loving kindness. And he said, "Oh, that's a little better." So Frank put his hands further away from him. And he said, "Oh, that's lovely, actually." There's no energetic bodywork, no California voodoo or anything. Just more space, just the space of awareness and love. And his words, not Frank's, not "my meditation," then came: "Oh, rest in love, rest in love." And when he'd get in trouble, he'd push his morphine pump and just repeat to himself, "Rest in love, rest in love." Maybe the morphine helped, who knows?

But you start to realize that you can be in the presence of your experience, your bodily experience, a painful one, or a beautiful, joyful one—receive the opening of the body, which will happen here—all with the space of loving awareness. And then identity begins to change. Because usually you take it as your pain. "Oh, God, I have a headache. My back aches. Poor me. Am I going to have this? Is it going to get worse tomorrow?" You know how the mind is. "Oh, my God, how will I finish ten days? Today's already achy. They're going to have to wheel me out of here." You want to go home to your mother if you had a nice mother. Some of you. Some of you want to go home to your mother and get chicken soup or whatever. And you just build huge stories around that pain. "Oh, I'm going to have to get surgery for my knee pain. I know. I'll be the first person at Spirit Rock to have to get surgery before they leave." And things like that.

But after a time, it shifts from being your pain to just being pain. And as you get wiser, it shifts from being just pain to being the pain.

It's not just your pain actually. When you get quiet and open, you realize it's the pain of having a body. Everybody shares in this. She does and he does—it's part of it.

And there I was at Dana-Farber, looking at all these people tending their loved ones who had cancer. It wasn't somebody's cancer. It was our human lot—that we have at some point in our life aging or sickness or pain. And so it's not that you've done something wrong or that you shouldn't have it. But you become mindful and you note, "Oh, pain." And you touch it and hold it with a merciful, kind attention. And you start to discover that that's not who you are—that you are the loving awareness that can notice it.

And then you notice this other stuff that happens. You get bored or restless. And these are really important—to be bored. It is. And restless. Anybody who hasn't been bored hasn't been paying attention here. I mean, you're just doing your breath, right?

Because when you're home and you're bored, what do you do? You open the refrigerator. Or you get online or something. Because you can't be with yourself. You can't bear your boredom or your loneliness or your restlessness. So you can't actually be a human being who's present for yourself.

So here, if you're bored, be bored. And then you name it. "Bored, bored." There you are breathing. "I feel so bored." "Bored, bored." Or you're restless. And you think, "Oh my god, I'm so restless. I have to go walk. But they haven't rung the bell. I hope they ring the bell." "Hoping, hoping, hoping." And that settles down.

"But I'm so restless." You just name it. "Restless, restless, hoping, hoping." And then it settles down after a while and you can continue. Or maybe it doesn't settle down. It gets worse. "Restless, restless." "I can't stand it. It's too hard. I don't know what to do." It feels like you're jumping out of your skin.

You know what to do? Then you say to yourself, "All right, I'll die of restlessness. I'll be the first person this fall to die of restlessness at Spirit Rock." You surrender. You say, "Take me." And the minute that you say, "Take me, I'll die of restlessness," something interesting happens. Guess what? It gets easier—because most of the difficulty is your resistance to the experience.

"Oh my God, it's terrible, terrible." Dying, dying, dying—you're naming it "dying." OK, dying. I've died for a while. All right, still bored. Restless, restless. Dying, dying. OK, wonder what they're going to have for lunch?

Because the mind has no pride at all. You'll see it. It deals with something, and then it goes on to something else.

Or fear comes, and you think, "Oh, I shouldn't be afraid." Everybody's afraid at some point. Fear is the membrane between what you know and the unknown, and it's part of being human. So what do you do when fear arises? You can either identify with it—"my fear, I'm afraid"—or you name it. "Oh, here it is, strong. Fear, fear." The sweatiness, the stopping of the breath. You feel it in your body. You feel the emotion. And you look at it.

It tells a story. As Mark Twain said, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." And so you see its story. And the loving awareness is bigger than the fear. Fear, fear. "Oh my God, it's horrible." Terror, terror. "I think I'm going to die." Thinking, thinking. You're not actually dying. "Oh, but I'm doing pretty well with it. I'm hanging in there." Pride, pride. And you just start to notice the different experiences rise and fall in the field of loving awareness.

Or loneliness comes. The poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few ingredients can." So you note it. Lonely, lonely. And then your tears come, because as you sit, the unfinished business of the heart will arise—your loneliness and the regrets and the grief. You want to honor it and bow to it and say, "Ah, grieving. Tears, tears." They're called tears of the way, tears of the Dharma. Weeping, weeping. And you let that happen. And then you think, "What's for lunch?" Because that's what happens. And you start to see that these experiences are not you and they're not personal.

There's an expression I just learned—I think it might be from Russian, it might be Czech—but it's an idiom used about difficulties that goes, "Not my circus, not my monkey." The idiom basically means it's just not your problem. That's true for these emotions. They come and they do their dance—the fear and the joy, the judging mind.

Have you noticed the judging mind? You judge others: how they're practicing, who comes in late, how much food they're taking—all the judgment you project outward. And then all the self-judgment.

What to do? As Florida Scott Maxwell, the novelist, said, "No matter how old she is, a mother looks to her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." We have built into us this history of how we're supposed to be, and it comes out in the judging mind. So you sit here and judgment comes. You say, "I shouldn't judge. Stop judging."

"I hate that judgment." But what's that? Just more judgment.

So what can you do? You bow to it. You name it. "Oh, judging mind. Thank you for your opinion." You know whose voice it is—we won't talk about them. "Thank you for your opinion." And then you feel your breath again.

Or the doubting mind arises: "I can't do this. This is too hard. Everybody else looks like a Buddha, and I'm sitting here completely unable to do it. I'm the loser in the class. I'm the dunce, the Dharma dunce." All those things you tell yourself. And you say, "Thank you for your opinion." That's all. That's just the doubting mind. It's not who you are.

And then with loving awareness, you watch the thoughts that come and go. Little by little and gradually, there comes—equally naturally—a sense of ease and joy and a steadiness of love. That little half smile of the Buddha. You say, "Oh, there's the judging mind again." Or, "I know fear. Oh, I've seen you fifty times this retreat. Hello, fear. I know you." And it loses its power over you because it's not who you are. Who you are is the spirit, is this loving awareness that was born into your body.

When my daughter Cindy was in first grade, we took a trip to California to visit my family. While we were there, she lost a tooth. She ran into the kitchen to show me and asked, "Could the tooth fairy fly that far?" My mom shot me a look of concern and later suggested that by indulging in such fantasies, I was teaching my child not to trust adults. Wasn't Cindy going to feel betrayed when she found out the truth?

So the next time Cindy lost a tooth, she chattered with excitement as I put her to bed. "How does the tooth fairy get in?" she asked. "Through the window," I explained. "Shouldn't we unlock it then?" she asked. "Oh, I do that right before I go to bed," I said. "Why does the tooth fairy want everybody's teeth?" she went on.

I took a deep breath and considered my mother's advice. Cindy would soon figure out the truth anyway, so I told my inquisitive seven-and-a-half-year-old that in fact I was the tooth fairy. She cried hard. I apologized, explained that she was getting to an age at which it was more important for me to be honest with her than to play imaginary games. We cuddled for a while and she stopped crying. She had one last question: "What do you wear?"

You see, your thoughts will tell you all these stories. Not only are there emotions like loneliness and fear and sadness and tears, but there's also the tedium of it all. There's a cartoon in the New Yorker: a car crossing the vast Utah desert, and there's this roadside billboard that reads, "Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles." Basically a description of meditation.

There are reruns. You're stuck in Motel 6 late at night, and you can't turn the channel, and you can't turn it off. Ninety-some percent of the thoughts you have today were ones you thought yesterday.

They're repeats. Okay, thank you for your opinion.

So instead, you can note: *oh, planning mind... oh, remembering... oh, judging mind... doubting mind*—and then you come back to your breath. And the loving awareness allows you to step out of the thrall of the judgments and the thoughts, the gaining and the evaluation, and to actually be the presence itself. *Sila, samadhi, paññ̃a.*

I should probably stop here, but there's one more piece to go, because there are two wings to what allows the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to move through the world freely. One is the wing of wisdom or mindful understanding, and the other is the wing of love and compassion. They go together, which is why we're talking about loving awareness.

So as you sit, you will have at times expansion and pleasure and delight and joy that opens. Let yourself embody it, tend to it, inhabit it when it comes. And as you sit, you will suffer as well—because you get the tainted glory of humanity, all the beauty of it and the pleasure. You stop running around and running away, and you actually get to be present for it.

The Sufis put it this way: "Overcome any bitterness because you are not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you. Like the mother of the world, each of us is sharing a part of her heart, and therefore each human being is endowed with a certain measure of cosmic pain. You are called upon to meet it in compassion instead of self-pity."

Instead of "oh, poor me," we meet it and say: this is the pain of being a human being, along with the pleasure of being a human being. We all carry our measure of this. The question is, again, how do you carry it? Do you take it personally? Do you fight? Do you struggle in unhealthy ways? Or is there a way that you can carry it with dignity, with a free heart?

There's this little passage from Lewis Mumford: "A person of courage never needs weapons, but they may need bail." There's something about the courage of compassion. It's actually what allows you to show up for the world. Without compassion, you can't even be here fully, without this tenderness of heart.

And compassion is actually a strength. In the West, we think of love as a kind of weakness, but love is actually—well, you see these images of mothers picking cars up off their children. It's an immense power. When you begin to discover that within you is the great heart of compassion, then you can carry that anywhere and everywhere.

Thich Nhat Hanh says it so simply: "When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person in the boat remained calm and steady, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

So you become that one person.

Somebody asked this beautiful question this morning about merit, and buried in the question a little bit—at least as I heard it—was also: are we doing this for ourselves, or is there some other purpose to it? As if, in some way, we could even separate ourselves from the rest. Like the trees that Trudy talked about.

Alice Walker wrote it this way. She said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was. And it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I ran all around the house."

In fact, when it happens, you can't miss it. As we quiet the mind and open the heart, we begin to feel our connection with life. We're not separate from it. Our identity shifts. It is us.

And then you begin to realize as well that what this world needs more than anything is a change of heart, a change of consciousness. Ajahn Chah said, "Dharma means heart. Dharma is the work of the heart."

No amount of computers and internet and nanotechnology and space technology and biotechnology—all these amazing scientific things where we have the great library of Alexandria in our pockets—I mean, you have everything, maybe not everything you need, but all that information. But that isn't enough to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing environmental destruction. No amount of outer development will do it.

We have all this outer development and look at the world as it is. So at this time, what humanity needs is to match the outer development of life with the inner development. We need wisdom. We need virtue. We need someone who's unafraid to stand up for the truth no matter what. We need generosity to see it's not me, but it's us. As Moth-

er Teresa says, if you're lonely, if you have difficulty, the problem is you draw your family circle too small. It's all us. And so the shift of identity is into the great heart of compassion as well.

There's a book entitled *I Wish My Teacher Knew*, and these are second and third graders' handwriting—you know, those books with the little scrawly handwriting from kids. "I wish my teacher knew that I don't have pencils at home to do my homework." "I wish my teacher knew that my mom doesn't sign my reading log because she can't read." "I wish my teacher knew that after my mom got diagnosed with cancer, I'd been without a home three different times this year." "I wish my teacher knew that my dad works two jobs and I don't see him hardly at all." "I wish my teacher knew that my little brother gets scared and I get worried when he wakes me every night." "I wish my teacher knew that I'm smarter than she thinks." Isn't that lovely? "I wish my teacher knew that I love animals and would do anything for my animals. I would love to work at the SPCA so I could help animals get adopted." And you just hear the hearts of these children. This is our humanity, but it's not just them. It's you. It's all of us.

I remember sitting here one evening during teachings some years ago. A woman who had practiced here for some time, whose daughter had died, came just torn apart. As you can imagine, the death of your child is something really hard to go through. She said, "In the middle of this retreat is the day my daughter died. So I'd like permission to ring the bell outside 108 times in her honor." And so it was the sitting maybe before the talk or something, just getting dusk, and she went out. We'd had a memorial service for her daughter who had died, her teenage daughter, a few years before and rung the bell 108 times. And she went out and it was as if she was using the bell to talk to her daughter. She took the striker and she just whacked the bell as if her daughter could somehow hear her. We were sitting and I had to tell people why the bell was ringing. I said, "This woman who's on the retreat, her daughter died, teenage daughter, just a few years ago. And this is the day and the time." And we were all sitting there weeping because it wasn't just her daughter, but it was everybody who's ever lost anyone.

Yitzhak Perlman, one of the greatest violinists in the world, had polio as a child and was injured by it so that he has to walk with braces. He can't walk in an easy way. He was playing a violin concerto with the New York Symphony, maybe Lincoln Center or one of the great halls there. He'd walked on stage, put down his walking aids, took out his violin, and began to play. Partway through the performance, where he was doing a solo part, all of a sudden there was this loud crack and a string broke on his violin. Everybody wondered, what is he going to do? I'm sure it was a Stradivarius or some amazing violin. Would he get up and kind of use his braces and walk over and get another violin? Would he get one from the concertmaster? He sat for a moment and

paused and then nodded to the conductor to continue, and he played the whole rest of the concerto on three strings. People were riveted because it's not scored in that way and not easy to do. When it was finished, he got this wild applause and standing ovation from everyone. When it quieted down, he sort of quieted everybody down. He had something to say. He looked out and said, "Sometimes in life, what matters is to see how much music you can make with what you have left." It was a metaphor for his whole life, really—the body that he was given, the polio that he had. The string was really just a moment. But there's something deeper.

Oh, nobly born, begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember your true nature. Your true nature is loving awareness itself. It's the spirit that came into this body. It's the spirit that will leave this body, that animates, that receives all things. Become, as Ajahn Chah said, the one who knows. Become compassion. Become awareness itself.

And what we're doing with this very difficult and beautiful training—you're so lucky. Even with the difficulties, they're actually the best part. They're the part that train the greatness of heart. So they're fine. People come in and say, "I'm having a hard time," as if I'm going to give them a grade of C-minus. But actually I get really interested and appreciative. Oh, how's that going? Can you keep that dignity and loving awareness through it all?

This is our invitation—to sit and walk and be present. And as you transform your heart, you bring the gift that the world most needs to all you touch.

I've seen it in Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela. We visited Aung San Suu Kyi after seventeen years of prison and house arrest. She said, "You know, it wasn't really prison or house arrest because I never let myself hate them. I did it as a practice, a seventeen-year retreat." And now she's the light of Burma, running her country. Nelson Mandela walked out of prison with so much magnanimity and graciousness.

And that is your birthright—that you too can practice in this way.

CHAPTER 61

Big Mind Meditation

Jack Kornfield · 38 min

> *In this guided meditation from a Fall Insight Meditation Retreat, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a contemplative journey from focused attention to expansive awareness. Beginning with mindfulness of sound as a doorway, the practice gradually opens into what various Buddhist traditions call "big mind" or the sky-like nature of awareness itself—vast, transparent, and timeless.*
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> *The meditation explores how sounds arise and vanish like clouds or bubbles in the spacious field of consciousness, followed by similar observations of thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions. Drawing on language resonant with both Theravāda vipassanā and Mahāyāna teachings, Kornfield points to the mind's true nature as open, clear, and unobstructed—containing all phenomena yet not limited by them. The instruction "to know the truth, look directly into the nature of mind itself" echoes classical contemplative guidance found across Buddhist traditions.*
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> *This practice offers a powerful complement to more focused samādhi and satipaṭṭhāna techniques, helping practitioners recognize that awareness itself is inherently spacious and luminous. The meditation concludes by suffusing this vastness with compassion (karuṇā) for all beings who forget their true nature, culminating in what Kornfield calls "loving awareness"—the integration of clear knowing with boundless heart. This approach supports both formal meditation and a way of meeting daily experience with openness and tenderness.*

This morning's meditation will be a guided practice, shifting from the focus on breath and body to begin with another doorway of mindfulness: attention to sound.

Let yourself sit, continue to sit as you are, settled and still. And for this time, bring your attention to the doorway of the ear and begin to notice the words as they arise and as they vanish. Notice as well the soft sounds in the room. Notice the sound of the bells that arise. And relax into hearing, allowing distant sounds to come and go.

Like the breath which arises out of emptiness, appears, and then vanishes, so too the sounds appear, experienced for a moment, and then pass away.

As you listen, relax and open. Let yourself sense or feel in any way you can that your mind is not limited to the size of your head. Feel, imagine, sense that your mind is vast like the sky, as big as this room and even bigger, open and spacious. And the sounds that

you hear—these words appearing and disappearing, the distant sounds, the soft sounds in the room—all arise and pass like clouds or bubbles in the vast sky of mind. No inside, no outside. Just openness. Awareness itself, vast like the sky.

In the distance, sounds appear and move through one dimension of the sky. Bells arise. Relax into vastness, openness without any borders. Rest in the sky-like nature of your own mind. No inside or outside. Words appear and disappear. Sounds in the room arise and pass. Like clouds. Like bubbles. Leaving no trace.

To know the truth, look directly into the nature of mind itself. In its true state, mind is transparent, vast as the sky, timeless, containing all things, yet not limited by them. Wakefulness itself, pure, clear. Rest in the vast space and let each of the sounds appear like a cloud and dissolve, leaving the space open and empty. Silent.

As you rest in the vastness, let yourself also notice the play of thoughts. Just as sounds come and go, word thoughts and picture thoughts appear in the vast space of mind. A story is told, an image arises, and like clouds, they appear for a time and then disappear, leaving no trace. Sounds arise and vanish in the vastness. Thoughts and images appear like bubbles, like clouds, and then disappear. Rest in the vastness of awareness itself. Relax into it. Trust it. It is your home.

In its true state, say the texts, mind is naked, transparent, immaculate, vast as the sky, allowing for all things, yet not tainted by them. Rest in vast awareness, mind like space. Relax into it.

Notice these words and sounds. They appear and dissolve. Notice the thoughts like clouds arising for a time and vanishing, leaving no trace. You are the vastness. You are the one who knows, the timeless awareness, open like the sky. Rest in this true nature. Relax into it.

Notice too the sensations of the body. If you feel carefully, there is no solid body. There are areas of pressure and hardness, of warmth and cool, of tingling and vibration. All float and change slowly in the vast space of mind. No solid body—a field of changing sensations with space in and around each of them. Tingling, pressure, cool, warm. The field of body sensations floats and slowly changes in the vast space of mind.

Sounds appear and disappear. Thoughts and images arise like clouds, like bubbles in the vastness. They display themselves and vanish, leaving no trace. Sensations float and slowly change. The breath moves like a breeze. No inside or outside—just the soft presence of breath, like a pulsing movement in the vastness. Relax into stillness and openness. You are the vastness. You are the one who knows.

Sounds come and go. Words and images appear and disappear like clouds, like bubbles—empty, nothing solid. Sensations float and slowly change. The breath moves like a breeze, its soft sensations arising in the vastness. The mind is the sky itself—vast and transparent, timeless, knowing all things that arise yet not limited by them.

Emotions can arise like weather: sorrow or laughter, joy, confusion, sadness. They arise and color the flavor of space for a time. And they too vanish without leaving a trace. Relax. Rest in vastness. Trust it. Open into it. It is your home.

As you rest in the vastness that is your own true nature, sounds and sensations appear and float and vanish. Thoughts and emotions arise like clouds or weather, like bubbles. Trust the vastness. Let go into it. Rest in it. Be the one who knows the knowing.

And finally, let this vastness also be filled with a tender-hearted compassion for all those beings who forget who they really are and get caught up in fear and confusion, in hatred and grasping. So many beings who forget their own true nature. Let the tenderness fill the vastness—awareness and love for all that lives, compassion for the sorrows. You are loving awareness: timeless, open, wakeful. Rest in vastness and love. Trust it. Open into it. Loving awareness, wakefulness and love without boundaries, vast.

As you let your eyes open, sense the vastness with sights appearing within it. And let yourself also extend the field of love to all those around you.

You can even look around a little bit at the beings appearing in this vastness and field of love.

CHAPTER 62

The Bodhisattva & Power of Intention

Jack Kornfield · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk from a Fall Insight Meditation Retreat, Jack Kornfield illuminates the path of the Bodhisattva and the transformative power of intention (cetanā). Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that kamma is created by intention, Kornfield explains how the same action can have entirely different karmic significance depending on the heart's motivation behind it.*
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> *Kornfield distinguishes between short-term intention—the "mindful pause" that allows us to ask "What is my best intention here?" before responding—and long-term intention, which sets the compass of the heart toward a guiding north star. He shares the traditional Bodhisattva vows, including Śāntideva's beautiful aspiration that the Dalai Lama recites daily, and invites practitioners to craft their own personal vows. The teaching is enriched by the story of A.T. Ariyaratne's remarkable 500-year peace plan for Sri Lanka, demonstrating how vast vision combined with compassionate intention can transform seemingly intractable conflicts.*
>
> *The talk addresses practical wisdom for leaving retreat and returning to daily life: not judging ourselves or others, becoming a "stream of benevolence," and remembering that we carry the great powers of mindfulness and compassion. Kornfield weaves together stories from his own experience—including bringing the Buddha and Quan Yin into difficult divorce negotiations—with teachings from the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Tutu, and others. He concludes with Mary Oliver's poem invoking the Buddha's final instruction: "Make of yourself a light." This teaching offers both the philosophical foundation and practical tools for living as a modern Bodhisattva.*

The day that this hall opened, this bell appeared. It was a gift from Zen Center. We kind of wanted a bell, and then this great big beautiful bell just appeared. "Oh yes, you need this," from your friends at Zen Center. I love it. I could just sit and ring it. In fact, I do.

And the other thing that appeared the day we opened was that beautiful carpet out there. A friend who deals in carpets came up. I said, "Come look at our new space." And he said, "Oh, I've had this carpet for a long time, saved for something. I don't know what. Let me try it out up here." He unrolled it, and it was like people just started to pour in gifts for this place. And now, sixteen or seventeen years later, there have been

2.6 million meditation hours in this room. You added your frequent flyer meditation miles. It's such a marvelous and special thing to have a temple that people can come and learn in the way that you have.

So tonight I want to continue the theme of identity and particularly talk about the identity of the Bodhisattva.

This evening, that kind of mist and the rain—like out of one of those beautiful ancient Chinese watercolors.

The question people have is: How to leave the temple? Going back to work, to family, to relationships, to the society and world and to the elections and all of the madness that's out there—and beauty.

There are just a few simple things to remember. The first: you've learned, as you've sat and walked, to not be so judgmental. Your mind has a mind of its own. It's a little bit mad sometimes, you may have noticed—and not just in the angry way, but in the madness way. It has no pride. And to remember not to judge yourself and not to judge others. It's really a treasure to walk through the world in this way.

During my first year of teaching, a girl named Shay was assigned to my middle school seventh grade class. She was a desperately unhappy child and rebelled against the most basic rules, such as stay in your seat, raise your hand to speak. Shay and I battled for control of the classroom. I tried every technique I knew—behavioral contracts, praise, reprimands—none of them worked. I even called Shay's home every week, but no one answered. She lived with and was being raised by an older sister.

I went to the school counselor, who said I'd done my duty and offered to transfer Shay to another classroom. I declined. Shay was my student, and I wasn't going to pass her on to someone else. In the faculty lounge, the older teachers patted me on the back, thankful they didn't have Shay in their classroom.

June finally came. On the last day of school, Shay was quick to head out the door. As I sat contemplating my failure with her, she walked back in. "Oh great," I thought, "one last act of terrorism." In Shay's hand was a small bowl, the kind that students make in ceramics class. She thrust it into my grasp. "Here," she said, "it's the only thing I could think of to give you." I turned the slightly misshapen bowl over and saw Shay's initials etched on the bottom. "Thanks for trying to like me," she said. And before I could speak, she turned and left.

After several more years of teaching, I went on to become a school principal and now a superintendent. Shea's bowl has never left my desk. "Thanks for trying to like me."

As I believe I said in the first talk, from Nelson Mandela: it never hurts to see the good in someone. They often act the better because of it.

And so there is something that's not even personal. It's something bigger than taking the experiences that we have personally. It's allowing yourself to become a stream of benevolence. "Thanks for trying to like me." You leave with great powers. It's quite wonderful. You leave with the powers of mindfulness and compassion, and with them a particular key—a key that's central to the awakening of the Buddha, to Buddhist psychology—which is the key of wise intention.

Karma, that oft-used word that has all kinds of meanings and mis-meanings. You hear the advertisement on the radio: "Please come to this used car dealer in Berkeley because it's his karma to give you cars at the lowest possible price." Your karmic misfortune if you believe him, or whatever. But what does karma really mean? There are many ways to understand it. But at its simple essence, kamma vipaka—karma, cause and result, action and result—comes down to one simple thing: karma is created by intention.

So if you get in your car in the driveway and you pull out and crash into the next door neighbor's house, through the hedge and into their living room, because you are so furious that they cut down all those beautiful trees along the property line, and also that they called the pound on your dog because it went over and did its duty on their lawn, and they tried to get it confiscated, and they did terrible things—and you're just enraged and you do that—the little blue lights will join you, and the police will take you away, and you'll have to deal with the consequences of that violent act.

But if you do the exact same act—you pull out of your driveway and crash through the hedge and into the living room of your neighbor—because the gas pedal stuck, one of those models where that happens, and you couldn't stop it, instead of arrest for your action, even though the neighbor might be upset, there will also be sympathy. "Are you hurt? Are you okay? What can we do? How do we fix all of this?" Exact same action: car, hedge, crash into the house, you at the wheel. The only difference was the intention. Your intention is that which creates the unfolding of your life and your karma.

If you study all the texts that talk about dying, the moment of death, there's weighty karma and habitual karma and proximate karma and random karma—all these kinds of karma. But the most powerful one, or the most significant one, is the habitual karma. What we practice becomes who we are next.

Tomorrow morning we'll talk about ways to support mindfulness and compassion in your daily life—daily practice, community, retreat, and so forth. To be able to pay attention to your karma, or your intention if you will, takes mindfulness. It takes care, which is why you practice. There's no such thing as a one-walk dog, right? You have your dog, and every morning you walk your dog, and hopefully every day also you do your mindfulness practice.

So the key in relationship, in work, in action, is intention. There are both short-term and long-term intentions. Short-term intention can be most usefully described, when you work with it as a practice, as the mindful pause. There you are in the middle of a conversation with your beloved, and there comes to be a little bit of friction—which doesn't happen very often, but could happen even with such enlightened people as ourselves. Couldn't it? I suppose.

And when you find yourself in conflict, in relationship, or in work, or in other circumstances, if you can take a single breath or two, make a little space of pause, and ask yourself, "What is my best intention here? What is my highest? What's my best intention?"—all of a sudden, things will change. Because how you respond or speak matters. You can say, "What did you mean?" in a kind of upset, angry way, where you're trying to be right and be strong and defend yourself. Or you can say, "What did you mean? I want to understand."

You want to listen. You want to learn. There's a caring in it. The tone of voice and the intention to understand versus to barricade and be right takes the conversation in entirely different directions.

Or you're about to answer that email or that text where someone sent you something and there's some concern, some conflict. You look and you take a breath, a mindful pause, and you read it and say, "What's my best intention?" Oh, I want to get along, I want to solve this, I care about this person. Usually it's true—even "I love this person." Then you really say, "I think I'll change a couple of words there. I'll soften the language. Make it a little more connecting before I press send."

Do you understand this? It's not so complicated. To have a mindful pause is making space in which you can then see with the heart and not with the habit of reactivity.

You know when you build a fire—there's this beautiful poem about it: "What makes a fire burn is the space between the logs, the breathing space. Too much of a good thing, too many logs packed in too tight, can squelch the fire as quickly as water." So there's something about making space. It makes a huge amount of difference.

When I was in the middle of what was a painful divorce—there are apparently some divorces that aren't painful, but they're in the minority—dealing with the lawyers and things after a long marriage, it was quite difficult. I was very devoted. But it became clear that we had different needs, and my ex really didn't want to stay married. I'm quite loyal and I would have, but she didn't want to. When it came to dividing everything and various other things, it was pretty painful. Meeting with lawyers was not easy. She was very concerned and worried, which fueled things more.

I would go in, and I would take a breath—or two, or ten. Then I would envision that on one arm was Quan Yin, compassion, and on the other was the Buddha, great equanimity and wisdom, and we would go in together. I would sit down, and by taking the breath and bringing in the Buddha and Quan Yin, I was so much better off than if I'd gone in alone.

It was all because I took the breath and asked, "What is my best intention?" and let me get support for this. You can imagine some difficulty in your life. What would happen if you brought the goddess of compassion and the Buddha—or whoever it is—in with you? Makes it easier, it turns out. They handle it better. They have both concern and listening and tenderness. There's a lot of equanimity. And also a kind of courage—a courage to be present without reactivity.

There's a line I love: "To me, there's no greater act of courage than being the one who kisses first." I'd call it the courage to forgive. There's something really brave about saying, "Alright, I'm here and I'm present and I will tend to what needs to be done, but I'll do it with an open heart." All that comes with a simple pause and asking, "What's my best intention? What's my highest intention?"

Now the other dimension of intention, cetanā, is long-term intention. Long-term intention is a way of setting the compass of the heart, setting the direction of your life toward some north star that really matters to you.

Star is a good image for me to use because when I was a kid, one of the things I liked to do was go out and lie on the grass on a clear night and look at the stars. But what was fun for me was to imagine that I was on the bottom of the earth. Because there really isn't a top and bottom, you know. The maps were made by certain people who thought they should be on top—mostly European white folks who put themselves there.

But there isn't, actually. There's no top or bottom. And I would imagine I was at the bottom, stuck onto the earth by the magnet of gravity, holding on so I didn't fall down. Then I would look down into the sea of stars. There was this kind of little thrill that would come because I'm holding on and I'm not going to fall down into it. But it was marvelous to do.

And there's something about long-term intention in which you sense the vastness of time—not an election cycle, not the rise and fall of a business, not concerns for individuals and people that you love, though all those matter. But they're all taking place in the turning of the seasons and the vastness of the solar system and the galaxies and the enormity of space and time unfolding.

Long-term vows. When you sit in Zen, when you go to a Zen center, or before you do your meditation, you put your hands together in some way or other. "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." It's the first of these four vows. "Desires are endless. I vow to master them"—or overcome them, or whatever you want to do with them. And so forth. There are these extraordinary vows of the Bodhisattva. Beings are numberless. I vow to save them all.

Now there's a little problem with this that I've often mentioned when I talk about it. And that is that the beings that you know personally don't want to be saved by you. You might notice that in your family and in your community. So it has to have some other kind of meaning. And it does.

Listen to this bodhisattva vow from Shantideva that the Dalai Lama recites every morning when he wakes up: "May I be a bridge, a boat, a raft to ferry those across the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp in the darkness for all who are lost. May I be medicine for those who are ill. May I be the light that brings awakening to beings. For as long as beings exist, time and space, beyond all that, until all beings are awakened together, may I carry on this work of serving all beings."

Some little vow like that, something like that in the morning. But what's beautiful, if you listen to it, is it's not about saving the person next to you in some kind of misguided way. It's saying, "I set my heart in the direction of compassion for myself and all beings, no matter what happens." The sun can rise in the west, the bodhisattva has only one way, which is the way of compassion, no matter what happens.

One of my favorite examples—and a story I like to tell about this—Trudy and I got to see him this last year when we were teaching together in Singapore. There's a wonderful elder in Sri Lanka named A.T. Ariyaratne. He came to this wisdom conference in

Singapore. There were all kinds of great speakers, both spiritual and corporate heads and government people. And then there was Ari, who was like having the Dalai Lama arrive—just a different energy.

Ariyaratne, who's now eighty-four or eighty-five, started a movement called Sarvodaya in which he became the master of service and community development in Sri Lanka. Digging wells, building schools, creating roads, making community for more than half the villages in the entire country. And he said, "We're not in it to build schools or dig wells or make roads. We're in it to make people love one another." That's really why we're doing this. And that intention underneath is what made it work.

But in the middle of a peace accord that was faltering during their recent civil war, Ari called all his followers together to the great temple at Anuradhapura, and 650,000 people came. This is in a country of only eighteen million people. They all gathered there. And he said, "We need to support peace in our country after the civil war. And so what I would like to present to you is the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan."

He said, "In Buddhist teachings we understand that we should look not just to the results, but to the causes and conditions. And if we look deeply, we can see that it's taken 500 years to create our suffering. Four hundred years of colonial oppression from the British, 500 years of conflict between Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, 200 years of economic disparity between the rich wet parts and the poor dry parts."

So he said, it took 500 years to get into this conflict. And what I propose is the 500-year peace plan, because that's how long it will take us to undo it. Five years of ceasefire. Ten years of rebuilding roads and schools. Twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religions. Fifty years of an economic program to develop the poorest parts from the richest parts. And every hundred years we'll have a grand council to see if we're going in the right direction, tune it, and then we'll do it again for another hundred years. Within 500 years, we can solve this problem.

I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama at one point when I was giving some teachings at a place where he was. And I partly did it because I thought he would like it, because he's in the same position with Tibet—all kinds of terrible things have happened—and to have the long view. Here was somebody who didn't care about the next election cycle, or what was going to happen between one faction or another. He said, this is the direction we go. Ceasefire, peace, caring for one another, even if it takes 500 years. The Dalai Lama, of course, was very happy to hear it, and they're buddies anyway.

So the bodhisattva is a being who is committed to compassion and tending life in all its forms, no matter what—compassion and freedom. And there are all kinds of modern bodhisattva vows. "May I put down the guns, bandage the wounds, carry the water, and share the bread." There's a modern bodhisattva vow.

Or Diane Ackerman—I have always loved this poem: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

So you set your heart in a direction, the compass of your heart, with your own bodhisattva vows. And then—the important and interesting thing, and the secret; you've sat all these days and now you get the secret—the secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of your actions. To plant beautiful seeds in the world and trust that sooner or later those seeds will bear fruit.

This is Thomas Merton again, Christian mystic. "Do not depend on the hope of results," he writes to a disillusioned activist. "You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all—if not, perhaps at times bring about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And you don't get to choose how it's going to come out. I have this card that I got when we were traveling in Asia, in some pretty remote and not terribly modernized place. They put this card on our bed in this particular hotel. It said, "Dear Guests, it is our pleasure to provide you with a stamped postcard for sending out to your loved ones around the world. Please leave card at the desk or receptionist after filling up the address and your greetings. We will gladly mail for you. Note: due to poor postage system, your postcard may take some time to reach, or even may not always reach to your address. Hotel management."

So you fill it out and you put it in the mail and it gets somewhere—who knows where it gets, right? But the secret of it, and it turns out, is that you don't know what the results will be. That's not what's given to you.

I saw this documentary that the BBC had done on the siege of Leningrad at the end of World War II—three years in which more than half a million people died. Just horrendous. And there was an old woman they were interviewing who lived in Leningrad. She'd been a child during the siege. She described how terrible it was. And as she talked, she said, "Here, I have something else to show you." And she walked down this narrow corridor in her apartment.

She had this sort of railroad apartment. And she said, "When I was seven or eight, during the siege, and the food was so scarce, we would stand in a bread line once a week and they'd give us a piece of bread. It was a rainy day and there was ice on the streets, kind of slippery. I came out carrying the bread and I fell into the mud, and the bread fell with me and got all muddy. I was sitting there in the rain with the bread in the mud. And a woman walked out, an older woman, and she came over to me, helped me up, and she tore her bread in half and gave me half of her bread."

And she said, "Here, look." She opened her cabinet and took out this ceramic bowl and opened it. Inside, wrapped in a blue napkin, was a little piece of that bread. She said that gift, that act from that woman, is what kept them alive. And it wasn't the bread. It was that spirit that kept them alive through all those years.

So it doesn't have to be big things. It's the moment of your intention and your action. And what you start to feel—and you have been empowered to know this—is a shift of identity. Many of you have been rather loyal to your suffering. You know what I mean? And that's okay. You have to suffer it and grieve it and experience it. But my mother would say something in Yiddish: "Enough already." It's time to let go and not to live your life or your meditation as a grim duty.

The dark of the night has its purpose. Know that you are not alone and that this darkness has its purpose. Gradually it will school your eyes to find the gift your life requires hidden in this night corner, illuminating your heart. That's from a poem by John O'Donohue.

You have suffered. Everybody's suffered. Use it well. Instead of being loyal to it, go through it and let it empower you to care for yourself and others in a deeper and more beautiful way. For its true purpose is to open the great heart of compassion in you.

And then you can do what my friend Malidoma Somé, a West African shaman and medicine man, describes in this beautiful West African metaphor: then you can deliver your cargo. He says among the Dagara people, they believe that every being who is born is given a certain cargo to deliver to the earth—your particular gift, your art, your love, your voice, your connection, whatever it is. And the only thing that satisfies you in the fulfillment of your human incarnation is to deliver your cargo.

I love the metaphor. It's very West African—cargo ships and canoes on the river, all of that water culture. So to deliver your cargo, there are a few things that are important if you're not so caught in your own suffering.

One is—and there's a beautiful new book by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu called *The Book of Joy*. A friend of ours helped bring them together in Dharamsala. Bishop Tutu flew there, and they spent a week together talking about how they could be happy even amidst the sufferings of their lives. It's really fun to read parts of it because they tease each other constantly. Tutu is eighty-five, I think, and the Dalai Lama is eighty. They're really good buddies.

When Tutu arrived from the airport, there were all these people with flags and banners. And Tutu said, "Oh, thank you for getting all your people out to welcome me." And the Dalai Lama says, "No, no—they were out for me." Then they start bickering. And Tutu says, "Stop it! We're supposed to be holy men. Look, the camera's on."

So the Dalai Lama is saying, "The problem is that our world and our education remain focused on external, materialistic values. We're not concerned enough with the inner values of the heart." And Tutu responds, "It's difficult to follow your profound pronouncements."

I thought you were going to say that in fact when you're pursuing happiness you're not going to find it. It's very elusive. You don't find it by saying, I'm going to forget about everything else and just pursue happiness. There's the title of a book by C.S. Lewis called *Surprised by Joy*, which I think expresses how it works.

Many people look at you, Tutu continues, and they think of all the awful things that have happened to you. Nothing can be more devastating than being exiled from your home, from the things precious to you, and having the families and people you knew imprisoned or killed. And yet when people come to you, they experience someone who has a wonderful serenity, a beautiful compassion, a mischievousness.

That's the right word, the Dalai Lama says. I don't like too much formality.

Don't interrupt me, Tutu says. Stop that, you know.

Oh, the Dalai Lama says, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, you know.

It's wonderful to discover that what we want is not actually happiness, Tutu goes on. It's not what I would speak of. I would speak of joy. Joy is a far greater thing. Think of a mother who's going to give birth. Almost all of us want to escape pain, and mothers know they're going to have great pain of giving birth, but they accept it. And even after the most painful labor, once the baby is out, you can't measure the mother's joy. A mother can be dead tired from work, worn down by all of the things that have worried her, and then her child is ill. That mother will not remember her exhaustion. She sits by the bedside of her child the night through, and when the child gets better, you see that joy.

So the Dalai Lama says, so much has been taken from me—my home, the temples. They've burned our texts, they've locked up the lamas, and so forth. Why should I also let them take my happiness?

To become a bodhisattva doesn't mean that it's a grim duty. In fact, your gift, what you offer, your cargo, is best offered with joy, best offered with a smile. Even if you go to work in the worst places—and the bodhisattvas sometimes willingly put themselves in the realms that are most difficult, saying, "I'll go there"—it doesn't help to be morose when you do it. It doesn't help anybody. It helps when you're able to be there and express a love that is not limited by the circumstances themselves.

Also, it can't be done by imitation. In this vast universe which now, as Wes was describing, has been recently found to have two trillion galaxies—they added a trillion or more recently to their count—there's never been anyone like you. Ever. Isn't that far out? Life created something completely different and unique in yourself.

Puanani Burgess, an educator in Hawaii, tells this story. One of the practices I like to use, I call "building the beloved community," like Martin Luther King's phrase. And there's an exercise to do this that requires people to tell three stories. The first is the story of your name. The second, the story of your community. And the third is to tell the story of your gift.

Once I did this process with a group in our local high school. We went around the circle and got to this young man, Kele. He told the story of his name well. He told the class the story of his community well. But when it came time to tell the story of his gift, he asked, "What, miss? What kind of gift you think I get, eh? I stay in the special ed class. I get a hard time read. I can't do no math. Why you make me shame for? Asked that kind of question. What kind gift you think I have? If I had gift, you think I'd be here?"

Kele had shut down and shut up, and I felt really ashamed. All the time I've done this, I've never shamed anyone before.

Two weeks later, I'm in our local grocery store and I see him down one of those aisles. I see his back and I turn around. Nope, I'm not going there.

And I start to back away, trying to get away from him. Then he turns around and sees me and throws his arms open and says, "Auntie, Auntie, I've been thinking about you, you know. Two weeks I've been thinking, what my gift, what my gift."

I say, "Okay, brother, what your gift?"

He says, "You know, I've been thinking, thinking. I cannot do the math stuff and I cannot read good, Auntie. But when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish. And the fish, he come every time. Every time I can put food on my family table. Every time. And sometime I stay in the ocean and the shark, he comes. And he look at me and I look at him and I tell him, Uncle, I'm not going to take plenty fish. I just take one, two fish just for my family. All the rest I leave for you. And so the shark, he say, oh, you cool, brother. And I tell the shark, Uncle, you cool. And the shark, he go his way and I go my way."

I look at this boy Kaylee, and I know what a genius he is. But in our society, the way the schools and education are run, he's rubbish. He's destroyed, not appreciated. So when I talked to his teacher and the principal, I asked them all: What would his life have been? What would our life be if our curriculum, if our education, if our community were based on the gifts that we can give to one another?

You each have this. You are unique. And you have to trust that you have something beautiful to offer. Somerset Maugham said there are three rules for writing the great English novel—unfortunately, no one knows what they are. No one can tell you how to do this, but you set your heart in the right direction, and moment by moment, being present, you plant the seeds of beauty.

And you can't be idealistic about it. In my industry, I get to be with lots of swamis and mamas and lamas and gurus and things like that. They have marvelous teachings and all kinds of benefits. And because they're human, they all have their foibles. Wes tells a story about a great Dzogchen master who's a friend of mine, really afraid to fly in airplanes. He can sit there and tell you to make your mind like sky, but when he's in the airplane in the sky, it's much harder for him. We talked about trauma work for him.

Even the Dalai Lama—Wes tells a story of riding in this little plane from Dharamsala back to Delhi on the edge of the Himalayas. It's bumpy, and the Dalai Lama says he's afraid of flying. Behind Wes is the Dalai Lama with his robe over his head and his people looking up. We're just human.

So the idea isn't to be somebody else. As I said in the first talk, the point isn't to perfect yourself—it's to perfect your love. And trust. Trust that you have the great powers of mindfulness, compassion, loving awareness, and forgiveness. You have them now. They are yours. And you've learned to trust that the heart is big enough to hold the whole world—to hold your tears and sorrow and love and longing and joy and expressions. All of it. And your neurosis. Oh, what a great example of neurosis that is. Thank you. Yes.

The bodhisattva is unafraid to love. There's been so much anti-Muslim rhetoric, so much prejudice and hatred. The greatest peace army the modern world has ever seen was in the 1930s in what was known as the Northwest Frontier Province, which is now part of Pakistan and Afghanistan, organized by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Over one hundred thousand men, warriors, all devout Muslims, vowed to resist British rule without weapons in their hands or violence in their hearts.

They kept their vow despite great provocation and many killings. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was a good friend of Gandhi's. It's an amazing thing to think that what we see as this dangerous place, and people upon whom we project our fears—but really, what that speaks to is the dignity of the human spirit. If you give human beings something that is great and beautiful to do, they will rise to it.

So being unafraid to love as the bodhisattva, no matter what.

Wes also went to interview Gary Snyder, a great environmentalist now in his mid-eighties, Pulitzer Prize winner, author of *Earth Household* and many other works as an environmental visionary. He asked, "Gary, now that you see global warming, climate change, loss of species, what message do you have for us at this time?"

And Gary said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt or anger. Too many burned-out activists. Save it because you love it." The other energies—guilt, anger—all those are part of the problem itself in consciousness. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it.

And that's the power of the bodhisattva, the power of love that lets mothers lift cars off their children.

I remember going to see Dipa Ma, this wonderful meditation master, a teacher of mine and Sharon's and Joseph's, in India. I visited her in Calcutta. I was having a hard time. I was a youngish teacher—I suppose I'd been teaching for six or seven years—and I was going through a period of some self-doubt and other kinds of struggles. I went to see her and get some teachings. After a couple of days with her—I'd been in Bodh Gaya before that and then visited her in her little apartment in Calcutta—she said, "Well, let Ma bless you before you go."

She was this tiny little person. And Bengalis hug—it's really great. She threw her arms around me. Then she began to bless me using her hands, whispering metta phrases and patting me all over my body for what must have been five or ten minutes. A long, long blessing. Metta, metta, metta, metta, metta. She was also a yogi with great concentration, deep meditation, and an amazing kind of presence. Then she said, "Okay, go with Ma's blessings."

So I walk out of the apartment and it's a hot day in Calcutta, and the streets are filled with honking taxis and ox carts, people pulling man-pulled rickshaws, people selling things. I go into this traffic jam, and it takes me two hours to get to Dum Dum Airport, which is the name of the Calcutta airport. Then I wait in line for two or three hours—the plane is always delayed, there's no air conditioning, it's sweltering—and finally I get on the plane. I fly to Bangkok, where I was going, and I get out and stand in long lines through Thai customs, and then it's a really hot season there, and the taxi's stuck in traffic.

And the whole time, I am just grinning. For three days, I couldn't stop smiling. Go with Ma's blessing. I was stoned on love.

The power of the bodhisattva is to take that love wherever you are. When we see suffering, we respond. That is the bodhisattva.

Barbara Widener, who founded Grandmothers for Peace, describes it this way: "I began to question what kind of world I'm leaving for my grandchildren. So I got a sign, 'A Grandmother for Peace,' and stood on a street corner. Then I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory"—because the U.S. is the largest exporter of weapons in the world. And then we worry that we're not safe. Crazy. "I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory. I was taken to prison, strip-searched, thrown into a cell. Something happened to me. I realized they couldn't do anything more to me. I was free."

And now Barbara and her organization, Grandmothers for Peace, works in dozens of countries around the world.

So the bodhisattva is not afraid to love—both in the vast way, in politics, in the environment, in social justice, in Black Lives Matter, in care for global warming, and all the things that are on our collective conscience and weigh on our heart. And in the most personal way as well.

A man was talking to Nisargadatta, my teacher in Bombay, complaining about his mother who was abusive, not a very good mother, not caring. He goes on and on, and finally Nisargadatta just stops him and says, "Love your mother. Love her anyway."

The man looks at Nisargadatta and says, "She wouldn't let me."

And Nisargadatta just rests for a moment and says, "She couldn't stop you. No one can stop you. No one can stop your love."

And it's never too late. That's the beautiful thing. It's never too late to be a bodhisattva. It's never too late to love. You can start today—and right on the money. Perfect timing.

So in the face of racism and war and violence and fundamentalism, the bodhisattva has one direction, like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan—a kind of dignity and compassion and presence that will not harm yourself and will not harm another. And not only unafraid to love, but unafraid to be happy.

That's harder for some of you, I know that. Oh my God, is it okay to be happy? But I see in each one of you the child of the spirit. And if you do mudita, joy practice, one of the best ways to open the heart of joy is to vision people and see their happiest moment as a child, their best adventure. I mean, look around for a moment. Just take a peek at your fellow yogis. And when you look at somebody, imagine their best adventure as a girl or a boy—laughing, running, playing tag, doing whatever, some great adventure. That child of the spirit is there in every single one, just like the Dalai Lama and Tutu. They still have it.

I'm about to leave this retreat and go back to Boston to be with my twin brother who is back in the hospital with very difficult cancer treatment. And he's been really an inspiration for me. When we were eight years old and lived in Buffalo, where there's lots of snow, it was one winter day, freezing cold. We went out with our mittens and hats and coats. And I'm shivering—I was skinny as a rail and really shivering. He's much stockier and stronger and played football. I was in the orchestra and he played football. That just tells you how it was.

He watches me shake and shiver. And then he says, "It's not cold." And he takes his hat off. "It's not cold." He takes his scarf off. "It's not cold." He starts dancing. He takes his jacket off. Then he takes his shirt off. He strips to the waist. And he's dancing around in the snow with the wind blowing, saying, "Cold? It's just in your mind. It's not cold."

That's his spirit.

So a couple of years ago when my mom was ninety-one and she was dying, she was kind of drifting in and out of coma, in bed here in San Francisco, and my twin brother and my other two brothers were all there. And sometimes when she'd come back, we'd say, "Mom, what do you think about this? It looks like you're dying or you're letting go."

She said, "I wish I could be around more. I know people are going to go to Mars. They're going to go to other planets."

I wish I could see it. She had that little sense of adventure. So there she is, close to dying in the next day or two, and she's making little noises. Herb goes over and says, "Mom! You're going to go to the planets! You're on a rocket ship!" And he starts shaking her bed. "Come on, we're taking off! You're going to go!" Our mouths are hanging open—what are you doing? "Come on, Mom, you're going to go for a big ride!" He just has this irrepressible spirit. And there's something so compelling about carrying this as a bodhisattva.

This is a story of a woman who took her husband to the Mayo Clinic for an evaluation after he was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, which usually means just a couple of years until you die. "We heard a pianist playing in the crowded atrium and realized as we walked in that it was the first song we had ever danced to, and the song we chose to dance to at our wedding years and years before. Randall put down his briefcase filled with the doctor's reports and test results and took me in his arms and danced me all over that floor. And when it was over and folks were applauding, we became aware of how many people gathered around were in wheelchairs and walkers. We suddenly realized that in that spontaneous moment of celebration, we'd been dancing on behalf of the life and love that lived in each person gathered together in that place. We looked around the room, lined with those waiting in wheelchairs, and we found ourselves thinking of the pool of Bethesda. We imagined Jesus asking, 'Do you want to be healed?' We thought we heard him say, 'Then pick up your feet and dance.'"

So there's something that the bodhisattva also brings to the world—a kind of joy. "Now and then," writes Guillermo Pollaner, "it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

And Laurie Chapman gives this meditation instruction for when you go home. She says, "I like nothing more in the world than sitting on my ass doing nothing. And it's not my fault that I have this attitude because I happen to have an amazingly comfortable ass. It may not look like much, but if you could sit on this baby for two minutes, you'd realize that getting up off this ass would be a crime against nature."

So close your eyes for a little bit and do a reflection. If you were to create your own bodhisattva vow to guide your life, to set the direction of your heart through all the many seasons and changes that human incarnation brings, make it simple. If you were to set your heart and make a vow, it could be as simple as, "I vow to be kind." What would it be on this beautiful rainy evening at the end of a silent retreat? Listen to your heart.

Let your eyes open. And if you are inclined—not at this moment, but this evening—write it down. And if you want to take it a step further, show it to someone else that you love. It's a very shy, tender thing to do, but you can say, "Oh, Jack told me I should do it." That gives you a little excuse. It's a beautiful thing because when you show it to someone, it's almost like you're saying out loud this, the heart of your bodhisattva intention.

From Mary Oliver, a poem called "The Buddha's Last Instruction." I think of this every morning. I think of the Buddha every morning as the east begins to tear off its many clouds of darkness, to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet, even green. An old man, he lay down between two sal trees, and he might have said anything knowing it was his final hour. Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen. No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head. He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd. "Make of yourself a light," he said. "Make of yourself a light."

That's it.

CHAPTER 63

Liberation and Mindfulness

Jack Kornfield · 1h02

> *In this opening talk from a fall insight meditation retreat, Jack Kornfield offers a comprehensive exploration of mindfulness as the path to liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that mindfulness is "the gateway to liberation and freedom," he contrasts two fundamental ways of living: the saṃsāric mode of unconscious reactivity driven by fear, greed, and delusion, and the awakened mode of loving awareness that brings inner peace and graciousness.*
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> *Kornfield presents three progressive levels of mindfulness practice. The first involves becoming present with the content of experience—learning to be with bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts without reactivity, thereby expanding what neuroscience calls our "window of tolerance." The second level shifts attention to the process itself, seeing all phenomena as impermanent (anicca), selfless (anattā), and arising and passing away. The third and deepest level turns attention to consciousness itself, discovering that while the body exists in time, awareness does not. He references the Ādittapariyāya Sutta (the Fire Sermon) and teachings from Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mun to illuminate how this shift in identity—becoming "the one who knows"—offers the greatest freedom.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes that liberation is available here and now, not requiring years of practice or distant pilgrimages. Kornfield weaves together stories from hospice work, neuroscience research on telomeres, and teachings from Mahāghosānanda's peace walks in Cambodia to demonstrate how mindfulness practice naturally leads to both inner freedom and compassionate engagement with the world. The talk concludes with the invitation to perfect not ourselves, but our love—recognizing that all beings are part of our family.*

Ringing the bell before a talk makes it sound momentous, but actually I just like ringing the bell. We got it on the opening day of this retreat hall. We were thinking we needed a bell and then magically San Francisco Zen Center sent us a gift, said, "We think you need a bell." And we did. So thank you, Zen Center.

You've completed one day of the retreat practice. A few of you are on your first retreat, and many of you have done quite a few retreats, but it still is a process of settling down. Tonight I'd like to talk about the core of our practice together. I'd like to talk about mindfulness, or what I also will be using as a synonym: loving awareness.

If you read in the Buddhist texts, they begin in the most wonderful way: that for living beings to realize well-being and liberation and overcome sorrow and grief and lamentation and despair—I think Spring talked about that—it's the practice of mindfulness. And in other texts, it says mindfulness is all-helpful, that mindfulness is the gateway to liberation and freedom. So I want us to think together, those of you who've been practicing for a long time and those who are newer, about what this means and what it means for us. How does this operate?

There are two ways to function in the world. One is without mindfulness. This is sometimes called samsaric, or cyclic—the cyclic way of living. Because without mindfulness, without some sense of awareness, when experiences arise, what arises with them is habit, reactivity. We get fearful, we get caught, we're blind. We like it, we don't like it. Without mindfulness, we live in a somewhat unconscious set of patterns that simply enact the conditioning around us—the cultural conditioning, the educational conditioning, and so forth. And as we do, not only is there not much sense of awareness and freedom, but unfortunately, those patterns build because they're based in delusion, in fear, in a sense that we can't trust the world, that we have to protect ourselves. It's called the body of fear. And it grows.

Just coming back from teaching with Trudy in China, being in Asia, talking to people in Singapore and Korea and so forth, I saw that as those societies have modernized, there's a tremendous amount of stress. There's all the kind of great prosperity that's happened, but there's also extremely high suicide rates for their children in Korea and Singapore and parts of China—children who are being driven to be ambitious and fulfill the goals of their parents or of the society. And then there's the grief that comes and the struggle. All of this is a kind of samsaric way of being where things continue to operate, but there's not a sense of inner freedom, of mindfulness, of being able to step back and really listen in a wise way.

If you read what is called the Fire Sermon, one of the first major talks of the Buddha, he begins: "This world is burning. This world is on fire"—which is something that I think you can taste in the air here. So it's not just metaphorical. But then he goes on: in what way is this world burning? It's burning with the fires of greed. It's burning with the fires of hatred and ignorance. It's burning with the fires of delusion. And these fires cause immense suffering. We can see those forces as they operate in the world and, to a certain extent, in our own lives when we're caught in greed and grasping and hatred and fear and ignorance and confusion. That's the samsaric nature, the repetitive nature of unconsciousness.

After his enlightenment, as the myth tells it, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of compassion in all four quarters and saw that there were beings suffering everywhere in different ways from delusion and greed and fear. And he saw that it would be possible to teach them a way that brought inner peace, liberation, wakefulness, ease, a sense of trust, graciousness. The way that he taught was to offer what we're doing here: the training and practice of mindfulness.

Now, whether you're a long-term practitioner or whether you're somewhat new, you don't have to wait for more years to find freedom, and you don't have to go to a long retreat in Thailand or Burma or go to the Himalayas. Freedom and well-being is available exactly where you are. I mean, where else would it be? This very body and this very mind is the place of liberation. It's the place we can get entangled and lost and habitual and repetitive and reactive and fearful. And it's also the place where trust, graciousness, wakefulness, and compassion can be born. As we find these qualities, or as we mature into them over the years of practice, we also then bring them to the world that so much needs them.

You're all familiar with the passage from Thich Nhat Hanh where he says: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive. And so as you train and practice in this great art of mindfulness and loving awareness, you become that person on the boat of the world that so much needs it.

The invitation, however many years of practice you have done, has two sides to it. One side, which Spring spoke about this morning, is an invitation to ease.

This is from Zen Master Ryokan, the most beloved poet in Japanese history. He writes:

If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Praise and blame, wealth and honor are nothing but dust. As the evening falls, I sit in my hermitage and stretch out both feet as an answer.

And so there he is in his mountain hermitage. Praise and blame, gain and loss, wealth and honor—what is the mark of enlightenment? I stretch out my feet in answer. There's something so gracious and lovely about this. He's not in conflict with the world.

So one of the invitations for your practice is to find ease in your heart, in your body, in your mind. And the other, which is a complement to that, is the invitation of fearlessness. Fearlessness doesn't mean you won't have fear. Anybody in this room not have fear? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. It doesn't work that way.

Fearlessness is something else. It is the steadiness, the courage, and the discipline to be present for this world with graciousness and ease on one side, but also with your full being. This is the invitation of practice—both ease and a kind of fearlessness that grows as we sit and walk.

When you think about where we're going on the spiritual path, the goal is not so much to get somewhere, but rather to open to the mystery of life. As it's said, the mystery of life is not a problem to solve but a reality to experience.

I think about sitting with one of the teachers from Spirit Rock, Marlene Jones. A couple of years ago, she had heart failure. Unfortunately, where she was in the circumstances, it took a long time for the paramedics to get to her—fifteen or twenty minutes. So she had no oxygen to her brain for a long time. They got her to the hospital, iced her down, put her in a coma, and brought her back out. For a week they tried everything they could to get any response from her. Nothing. They did all kinds of tests—brain dead, zero.

Sitting with her family, together we decided it was time to take her off all the life support machines. I was holding her hand and looking at her, saying, "Marlene, you've been so important and such a great colleague. You're dying too soon. I'm going to miss you, and there were so many things you could have done with us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." Sort of teasing her a little bit, trying to make people who were sitting with her—her daughter and so forth—smile a little bit as well.

As soon as I said that, two tears rolled down her cheeks. A week of nothing. The doctors prodding her, different electrical brain monitoring and so forth—nothing. "The least you could do is give us a sign," and then the tears.

Who are we? Who are you? What is that spirit that was born into your body and that will also leave your body when you die? I could tell lots more stories, but you get the idea—we actually live in mystery. To be a human being is the most remarkable, mysterious thing you can imagine.

I was at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering a couple of years ago. I don't think that will be happening again soon—I'm going to leave that aside. I was able to give one of the key talks there on the Buddhist teachings of wise society: treating all members of society with respect, coming together in harmony and leaving in harmony. You know the things we've seen so recently—taking care of the vulnerable, the young, the elderly, those who are sick, the women. This is a way, said the Buddha, that a society prospers and does not decline. And care for the environment. There's a whole text about wise society.

But it's also not all that different from what you'd find in the great spiritual traditions around the world—from the Native Americans, from the wisest teachings in Jewish and Christian traditions, in Native traditions in Africa, and all kinds of places like that.

But the difference, and what made this conference so compelling, was that while these are beautiful visions of wise society, there's actually a way to do it. With the five thousand neuroscience studies and papers in the last few decades on mindfulness and compassion, it's now—as you know—in school systems, tens of thousands of them, in clinics, being employed in business, in the arts, and so forth. I have a big packet that was sent to me called "Mindful Nation," signed by the eighty-five members of the British Parliament Mindfulness Group.

We can only hope that it's transmitted across the pond to our side sometime soon.

With mindfulness comes an invitation to freedom here and now, where we are. It's the only place we can find it. And it manifests at three different levels—call it mindfulness or loving awareness.

The first level of freedom is our ability to know and be present for the content of experience. We sit with our breath and our body, and we encounter tension and pain, pleasure and ease, tingling, heat, and fire. We learn how to sit with it. We can name it gently: this is tingling, this is tension. These are the different experiences we have. As we sit and the body starts to open, we become aware of the content of our body experience—all the sensations and feelings that make up our embodied life.

What grows with this, in neuroscience terms, is called the window of tolerance. We live in a society that is pretty much terrified of pain, a culture of comfort. Too cold? Turn up the heat. Too hot? Turn on the air conditioning. Do whatever you can to make yourself comfortable. If you're uncomfortable, the problem is out there.

But here's the thing: Is there anybody in the room who doesn't have discomfort or pain in their life, in spite of all those attempts to keep it at bay? You don't have to bother raising your hand. This is simply the way it is—praise and blame, pleasure and pain. We have it all.

If we can actually be with the content of our experience, we start to find a freedom already. Freedom with pain, freedom with tingling and tension, with hot and cold. Instead of being so reactive, mindfulness allows us to be present for that experience.

Of course, it can get more extreme. Trudy and I had dinner in Hawaii while visiting some friends, and this world-famous magician named David Blaine was there doing card tricks that I couldn't imagine how he accomplished. He said he loved performing them especially in front of scientists. He showed us videos he'd done with Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates, and they were going crazy wondering, "How could you do that? What's the physics of this?" I just said, "This is really good magic."

He was talking about how he pushes his body to extremes—he's the one who hung in a glass box over the Thames River for forty-three days, only drinking liquids without eating. He's an extreme kind of guy. I talked about living in a monastery where our training was to master the postures by sitting for twenty-four hours without moving, or standing for twenty-four hours without moving. He said, "Oh yeah, I once did twelve days standing without moving." I said, "Okay, you've got me." But it felt like there was some kind of brotherhood between us.

What happens when we learn to be mindful is that we can actually tolerate this world rather than be frightened of it. And it's not just a personal freedom that comes. As James Baldwin writes, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

When we can't bear our pain or our fear or our insecurity, we project it out onto others—on the communists, or the black people, or the yellow people, or the native people, or the Muslims, or the immigrants. It was Russia for a while. I think Russia is coming back as an enemy du jour; it's going to have a recurrence now. But we project it out because we live in a way that can't bear the reality of insecurity. And yet, it's the truth of the world.

So we learn more and more what it's like to be present for our body. And in the same way, we learn how to be present for our feelings—the tears and joy and grief and all the things that will come up on retreat.

Here is a story from Frank Ostaseski, who started the Zen Center Hospice and is a good friend I've been teaching with recently. He writes about a woman named Jillian. She worked in publishing, and when her mother developed Alzheimer's, she decided to bring her mother with dementia to live with her and hired a caregiver. One day she came home and walked into the living room to find all her beloved books—including her favorite Buddhist texts—scattered across the floor. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty books. I'm going to give them to my dentist."

You can hear the mind state.

And she became immediately angry and trapped and caught up, and started to scold the caregiver. "How could you let this happen? How could you let her do this?" And the caregiver, who wasn't caught in that drama, replied, "Madam, today I pack the books up. Tomorrow I will unpack them. If this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well then, that's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

And you can feel the graciousness of heart and the ability to be with uncertainty and change that's in that story. This is why we call it loving awareness. We start to learn a graciousness with the body experience, with the feelings that we have, with the mind states that come. Because we'll have all kinds of views come here. You're doing well, your mind tells you. You're not doing well. The world is a mess, but it's so beautiful. And everything in between, because the mind has no pride and it just keeps spitting out stories and plans and wise things and fearful ones and beliefs and so forth.

When I was eight or nine years old, probably around nine, we lived in Buffalo, New York—lots of snow. There was this huge snowstorm, icy winds. My twin brother and I, and my other brother a year younger, we decided we went out to play and got all wrapped up. The wind was blowing wildly. My twin brother was a lot bigger than I. He played football and I was not a football player, we'll just say that. Much more robust. I was really skinny then, and I was shaking and shivering. It was freezing cold and I'm shaking out there. He looked at me and said, "It's not cold." I said, "What do you mean?" He took off his hat, he unwrapped his scarf. "It's not cold." The wind is blowing, freezing. He took off his jacket. Pretty soon he stripped himself down to the waist and started dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold. You just think it's cold."

I remember this for my whole life. There was something about him, even as a young boy, knowing that mind states determine how we live in this world. And I didn't have to be caught in, "Oh, it's terrifying and it's cold and I'm frightened and I'm shivering and I have to go inside."

So as we become aware of the content of experience and can see the stories we tell and the beliefs, we say, "Oh, that's a belief. That's a story. How interesting." But we don't have to get caught in it.

Now the next level of mindfulness is mindfulness of the process. And for those of you who've been practicing for some time over these months and years, as you quiet your mind and open your heart, the sense of freedom of being able to be with experience begins to shift, because you start to look at the process of body and mind and senses in the world. What you see is that it's all impermanent. It's all arising and changing and passing away, and selfless in the sense that you don't choose your thoughts—I

hope not. Anyway, most of them in there you wouldn't choose. You don't choose your feelings very much. You certainly don't choose your body sensations. And you see that it's ephemeral, insecure, subject to change, subject to pain. This is the way it is. Everything you pay attention to arises for a time and vanishes. All of it.

In the time you listen to this one sentence, fifty thousand cells will have been born in your body and fifty thousand will have died. That's a billion in a day. Your body's always dying and being reborn and remaking itself, as is your whole idea of yourself.

As you start to see the process of experience, then a different kind of freedom comes, because you realize it's all changing and you don't want to hold on to it. Otherwise you get rope burn.

I remember walking with Ajahn Chah one day out on an alms round, and there was a big boulder in the field nearby.

And he said to us, is that boulder heavy? And of course we said to the master, yes, it is. And he said, not if you don't pick it up.

That was a kind of pith teaching about seeing the process of life and realizing that we can tend to it. We can respond, we can care for our family, our community, and the world, but we don't have to grasp it—because it's ungraspable. And there grows an ease with birth and death, with joy and sorrow.

So the second level of freedom comes when we start to see the nature of things and we get easy with it.

Frank Ostaseski tells a story about a woman who died at Zen Hospice, and one of her sons was twelve years old with Down syndrome. They were afraid to bring him, Tommy, because they didn't know how he would understand his mother's death. But Frank said, let's try it out. The father said, well, maybe we should talk to his therapist. Frank said, bring the therapist along—we'll work it out.

So Tommy went in to see his mother and stood there for a bit. Everybody was frightened that he'd freak out. And he looked at her and he said, "What is gone?" Just kind of in wonder. "What is gone?" Then he looked at his mother for a while and Frank said, what do you think, Tommy? And he started to talk about the Transformers movies where one thing would transform to another. She died—maybe she'll turn into something else. Very wise.

Frank said he stood there with him, realizing that Tommy was trying to understand in his own way. And then Tommy did a kind of remarkable thing. Frank asked, is there anything else you want to say to your mother or do with your mother? Tommy went over, and first he touched her very gently on her cheek. Then he began to smell her. He sniffed her whole body from head all the way down to her feet.

Frank said he remembered one time he was driving in New England, and a car ahead of him had hit a deer and killed it. There was a fawn with its mother, the deer that had died on the side of the road, and the fawn was coming and sniffing its mother, trying to understand what had happened. He said he stood there and it was so tender and so mysterious to have Tommy just go and be there and smell his mother. And then Tommy said, "Yes, okay." And he walked out.

This is us. We're in this mystery of birth and death. And to know the process of things gives a profound sense of freedom—that it is natural to be born, natural to die. It's natural to have birth and death, joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss. And there grows a graciousness and an understanding.

Then the third level of mindfulness that happens is the mindfulness of consciousness itself. Content, process, consciousness.

My teacher Ajahn Chah had practiced as a monk in the forest for about ten years, very ardently. In those days the forest had tigers, and everybody got malaria pretty much. He did all these austere practices and lots of deep meditation and had visions and profound insights and so forth. He finally went to see the greatest master of that time, another ajahn named Ajahn Mun. He told him all about his practices and said, do you have any guidance for me?

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, yes, Chah—you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. Dissolve your body into light, have a great vision, have some deep insight, overcome pain and pleasure and so forth—those are like movies. You get a war movie and a documentary and a romantic comedy and a love story. They all come and go. The only question for you to ask for your freedom is: to whom do these happen?

Turn your attention from the content or even the process of the experience back to the knowing, and become the one who knows. This invites a shift of identity.

"You live in illusion in the appearance of things," says Kalu Rinpoche, a great old Tibetan lama. "There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you remember, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So there's something for you to reflect on for the next nine days.

What it's pointing to is this—let me see if I can say it much more simply, because this is really a key to liberation. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? We all have that experience. The body is losing its fur and sagging and doing the things that aging does, wrinkling and all those changes. But the curious thing that's very common is you don't necessarily feel older. You know how common that experience is? That's because it's only your body that has aged. Your body exists in time. It grows—a little child, then an older child, a teen, a young adult, and it goes on. Then it gets older, and it dies.

But the awareness that's looking at that body in the mirror doesn't exist in time. It simply observes: "Oh, well, how are we doing at this stage of life? Hmm, lost some more fur," or whatever your commentary might be. "I wonder how much longer this one will last." Because, you know, you get it from Avis and then you have to turn it back in, right? It's just how it works.

So you start to look into the mystery of who you are. You turn your attention back to become the awareness itself, to look into who you are and to become the knowing, the one who knows. And you know this already in yourselves, in your being.

Alice Walker writes, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it came to me—that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house." When it happens, you just can't miss it.

Walking in the high mountains, listening to a piece of sacred music, making love, sitting with someone who's dying, or being there at the birth of a new human being—it's a wild thing. Here's another person coming out of someone's body. It's extraordinary. And you go, "Okay, all right, I don't really have the kind of intellectual answer, but I'm present for this mystery of life itself coming out of nothing."

You start to become the witness. You start to trust that you can rest in awareness itself. And this level of mindfulness gives you, as Ajahn Mun said, the greatest freedom of all—the freedom to sit with birth and to sit with death.

When you have this freedom, I think of my good friend and colleague and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, nominated for the Nobel Prize many times. He went back after the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rouge and spent fifteen years leading people back to their villages on foot. He told them, "You can't go in a bus or a car. You have to reclaim your land step by step with chants of loving-kindness." *Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed.* And they walked through the jungles and the killing fields, ringing a bell and chanting all the way back.

He was someone who had had this very deep training. He knew all nineteen members of his family had been killed. Yet there was a way in which he understood how to return to the world. Because the end of this process of mindfulness—from content to process to consciousness itself—doesn't end in some kind of spaced-out realm. Rather, when you enter and discover that who you are is nothing, and being nothing you are everything, as Kalu Rinpoche said, then the world becomes your family. You return and enter the world with a wiser heart and a freer spirit, no matter what happens.

Now as you continue to practice on this retreat, you will sense these levels as you go through the foundations of mindfulness. As your body opens up more—and Christiana will talk more about it tomorrow evening—you can learn how to be present for your body, not by striving, but as Spring talked about, with a graciousness or an ease. You let your body settle. Or if you can't be with your breath, you can pay attention to your hands or to the sounds around you. But you keep gently coming back and steadying your attention.

And as you do, of course, at the content level, you become able to be aware of the different pains and tensions and the things that are carried in your body. But at the same time, you also will start to find moments of ease and pleasure. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment. Peace and equanimity are other factors of enlightenment.

For those who are experienced practitioners, one of the best instructions you can have is to look for the moments of ease, the moments of joy, the moments of presence—and invite them to expand. Let the sense of well-being that starts to come periodically as you sit or walk, invite it to open. Dwell in it. Rest in it. You start to shift the figure and ground from the struggle with the body, even though sometimes you have to sit with things that are quite difficult and painful. Instead, you also invite a sense of ease and peace and well-being. This shift becomes really helpful.

Then as your mind gets quieter and you shift from content to process, the experiences of the body and the senses begin to break up and pixelate. Every sensation that's tight in the body, the sounds you hear—they all become like many little vibrations. Whatever seems solid starts more and more to become visible to your mindfulness or your loving awareness as a kind of vibrating energy field, full of life and not solid at all.

Trudy and I were at a conference together with Elissa Epel, who works with Liz Blackburn at UC Medical Center here. Liz received the Nobel Prize for discovering telomeres. Part of their research, which completely shocked them, was that after eight weeks of meditation practice, the telomeres—which are the caps on the end of chromosomes that protect them and keep them alive longer—actually grew and extended. They

couldn't believe it. They replicated it a few times. They were afraid to publish it because people would think they were kind of kooky. But that wasn't what she talked about. We already knew that.

She talked about some new research, and I really want to read this study to figure out how they did it. They studied the telomeres in a community that had a big disparity between rich and poor. Those who were poor, as you would expect, had frayed telomeres—the stress and the poverty and the racism and all the kinds of suffering affect the body very deeply. But the thing that was interesting is that those who were wealthy in that community, even if they were in a gated community, their telomeres had also diminished. It's as if the cells of your body are tuned in to the environment. You are not separate from your environment. It's really wild.

So as you get deeper and quieter, you start to see the body as an energy field. Yes, you can be with the content, but you see the process of life itself. And then there comes this mysterious thing that happens where you both love the body and tend it and care for it because it's really precious—and yet you discover something more.

I think of this quadriplegic who came to some dharma teachings. I can still hear his voice at one point where he said, "I've discovered I am not the body." He'd been unable to move for a number of years. He said, "I've discovered I am not this body. Hallelujah!" He shouted it out. And so there's both the care for the body, but in this paradoxical way, there's also an understanding that you rent it, you use it, you love it, you care for it—but it's not who you really are.

In the same way, these levels work with feelings. You notice the content of your feelings. As C.S. Lewis wrote, you will discover inside "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds"—and every other feeling in between. I won't read it, but I have a list of five hundred different feelings. So you start to see the content of the feelings and you're able to be present for them and to name them, to acknowledge, "This is sadness. Sad, sad." "This is excitement. Excitement, excitement." By naming the experiences, like naming the dragon, there comes a kind of freedom in relationship to them.

As that goes on, there comes a kind of maturing, because people often don't even know what they're feeling. I have a friend named Arturo Behar, who was the vice president of Facebook for a while. His job, among other things—he was an engineer—but then he was in charge of problem-solving for Facebook. He said, "So I was also the complaints department. And because we have nine hundred and eighty million users, it didn't take very long to get a million complaints." Talk about a complaints department!

He said about a third of them were engineering problems. "I gave them to the engineers and they fixed them. That's what engineers do, mostly, if they're good. But two-thirds of them were the problems between people."

You posted a picture of me that I don't like, I don't look good in it. You posted a picture of my children, how dare you. You said that about me. It was conflict between people.

At first, Arturo sent the boilerplate policy: if it's lewd or lascivious or hateful, then we'll take it down. This is our policy. Nobody was happy.

So he realized they had to do something about these complaints. He thought maybe it would be good if people contacted each other. He started sending out a message: Why don't you talk to the person that upset you? Or message them, whatever. But then he realized people weren't very skillful at that. So he said: Why don't you tell them what upset you and how you felt about it?

After a little while, he found that people didn't know what they felt. So he sent out those little emoticons—angry, sad, whatever. You can show them how you felt about it. And then he suggested: Why don't you get curious and ask them why they posted it?

The people who answered would say, "Well, I thought you looked good in that picture," or "I love your children. I thought it was a great thing. I'm so sorry." It turned out that in ninety-five percent of cases where people actually talked to each other, the conflict was resolved. As Arturo said, "I get to teach social and emotional learning and conflict resolution skills to 980 million people."

This is something we're learning in a much deeper way in ourselves—to recognize what we're feeling. Often that means recognizing the trauma, the deep hurts that are carried in our body, the stories that come with it, the emotions. It means being willing and able to be present for it all, the full content of it.

And then something very interesting happens. Because you feel both the suffering you've been through and the beauty of your life, you kind of open yourself to that. You become able to bear your measure of tears and your measure of sorrows. As the heart becomes more tender through practice—and many of you have practiced for a long time—you actually become more sensitive. But you also become more courageous and wiser. You're able to tolerate both the tears and the joy of the world, to bear witness to them, to bear them.

Then you receive something called the tears of the way, which are tears that are poignant. You feel the sufferings of the world and you see its unbearable beauty, and you let your heart be touched by them all.

The fact that we don't know this in our culture... As someone said, I'd like to take every legislator by the hand and walk them next to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and have them read out loud the names of everyone who was lost before anybody votes for war. Do not send anyone to war who does not know how to weep. When we talk about in our body politic the kind of conflicts that are happening and have happened, if that person isn't weeping, they're not paying attention.

We become more sensitive, but we also increase our capacity for love, for presence. As we do, we start to see the river of feelings that make up human life—fear and longing and love and grief and loss and delight and the feelings of connection and creativity. We can bow and name them: fear is like this, longing is like this, love is like this, sadness is like this, connection is like this. We start to inhabit and feel that this is the nature of human incarnation. We see the process of life itself rather than taking it so personally.

Then we look at the mind, the third foundation of mindfulness—the thoughts. This becomes really important as those who've practiced for a long time have matured, because we're really talking about how we live and embody this, not just on retreat but in life.

The Buddhist texts say: Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you worse than your own mind untrained. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than a trained and tame mind—not even the most loving parents or loving members of your family.

You start to see the stories and the attitudes, the content of thought. The whole inner dialogue that you build your sense of self and world out of. It's sometimes rather alarming for those who come on their first retreat. It's like you're stuck in a motel late at night and the shopping channel's on and you can't turn it off. You start to realize that ninety-five percent of what's in there is reruns—the same show as yesterday, whether good or bad.

They keep repeating themselves. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. It just does. But you also begin to notice the attitudes that you glom onto or that you get attached to. This is right and this is wrong and so forth. You start to see those different thoughts and attitudes.

And then, because you've been practicing for a while, you get to do what my beloved Trudy has taught me about, which she calls an attitude adjustment—where you see, okay, this is an attitude, but it actually doesn't have my best interest in mind. And you actually begin to realize that you can shift from one particular view or attitude to another. So you start to know the content and the stories and you don't believe them so much. You don't take them so seriously—the stories of unworthiness or the stories of grandiosity, the stories of success or failure, you know what your mind does, all of those kinds of things. And there comes a shift of identity where you're not so much identified with your thoughts. It becomes more about the process.

There's that wonderful story I'd like to tell of Ram Dass coming back from India with his beard and beads as Baba Ram Dass, teaching, and a woman in the front row waving her hand and saying, "Ram Dass, you're teaching all these Hindu things, Hindu guru, but aren't you Jewish?" And Ram Dass said, "Yeah, I am actually. I was bar mitzvahed." And he said, "There's a lot I love about Judaism. The Hasidic masters are like the Zen masters. If you read Buber's Tales of the Hasidim, they're fantastic. And the Kabbalah has all these maps of the levels of consciousness that are a great match to the Hindu teachings I love." Then he said, "But remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." And he was, of course, very witty as well as deep.

Because your identity is not your parents. And it's not even your gender or your race or your class. Those are things to honor and pay attention to. Without honoring them, we can have a lot of suffering. But that's not fundamentally who you are. As you become quieter, you start to see, oh, that's only the personality, when you look at the thoughts in the mind. Like your pet—okay, you've got it. Unfortunately, you've got a mutt in some cases, one of those adopted from the shelter. But you start to realize that the thought structures and the beliefs and the things you've been told about yourself—not only can you adjust your attitude, but you can also step back from them and see that those are just thoughts coming and going. They're like bubbles in a stream, and they don't last.

And it doesn't take that much. Here's a letter I received:

"Dear Jack, I really don't know how to talk to you directly, but I wanted to express how grateful I am just to be aware of your teachings. I found out about you through Duncan Trussell's podcast last year"—Duncan is a kind of dharma comedian with a big following among millennials, and I did some things with him—"and little by little, your ideas of loving yourself and having compassion kept inching their way toward what I guess is my heart. You soothed me in darker days and given me a glimpse into a more loving reality for myself. Tonight, I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided after

hearing you speak through my phone for months and months, I'd finally give in and just sit with myself for a while. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the twenty-one years I've lived so far. For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I latched onto, my anxiety, my hatred, and everything else I criticized myself about, with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I finally got some relief with what I felt inside and want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you so much."

It doesn't take that long. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. Maybe you have to come to Spirit Rock, but that's another story.

So you start to see these layers of mindfulness that acknowledges the content, that sees the process, and then steps back. And the shift of identity—as Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, says: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from unseen roots of all creation, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with humility and humanity." He's talking about his meditation, that all these things come unbidden, the joys and sorrows, but underneath, as we shift our identity and become the one who knows, there comes a spaciousness and a freedom and a beauty.

And that's the fourth foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of the dharma, of the laws that are operating—for example, the law of cause and effect.

That if you practice anger, guess what becomes more your habit? Anger. And not only that, if you plant seeds of anger by getting angry at lots of other people, guess what you will get back? Anger. If you plant seeds of love and practice love in yourself, that's what will grow. And you plant it in the world, that's what will return. If you plant greed in yourself, that's what will grow in you. And so you start to see this is actually very impersonal. This is simply how consciousness works.

And then you begin to see the emptiness of it, as it says in the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. Things arise—thoughts, feelings, experiences, whole years. I mean, what happened to 2016? It's back there with Y2K. Remember that one in the year 2000? And also back there with the Great Depression and the Egyptian empires and dynasties, all in the past. It went back to emptiness. There's this, and then it disappears.

And as you get quiet, you start to see: whoa, wait a second, it seems very solid, but all there is, is now. All there is, is this present. And the more you become able to rest in the awareness of this, you become the one who knows. There's a shift in reality for you. The experiences of the world still arise, but there's a sense of spaciousness, openness, graciousness, and of deep love.

As my teacher Nisargadatta in Bombay, the old guru, said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing and love sees that I am everything, and between these two my life flows." Because as you get more empty, and if you look to see who am I—am I the little awareness inside here, like that's yourself—you look and you can't find anything except it's aware. There's no self, nothing separate. And you start to realize that awareness is what the world is made of, consciousness itself. All things born out of consciousness. And from this place, you realize that it's your family then. This is who you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. Love says, I'm everything. Between these two, my life flows.

Mother Teresa puts it one way. She says, "The trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small." Life is your family. You come out of life. You are life. And you are what life is born from.

I think of Sharon Salzberg, our dear friend and colleague, who was walking down the street one day in Seattle when a somewhat toothless homeless man came up to her and said, "Don't you know me? Don't you know me?" And first she had to stop, because we've had a lot of students on retreats—it could have been somebody from her 1978 three-month retreat or whatever. But it turned out it wasn't somebody she literally knew. She said the moment was so affecting to her when he said, "Don't you know me?" Because he's one of us. He is one of us. He's one of our family members.

And as you get emptier, or as you learn to rest as awareness itself, you discover that this is what's real. This, and love. Because in the end, the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love. To be able to open the heart and mind and realize that, as the texts say, "Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature." Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. Everything is waiting for you.

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I feel so grateful to have had the years of practice and training where I've learned some of these things I speak about in myself. Sometimes I don't really know how people even can get through great difficulties without having some inner practices. It's so much harder. And I also just feel grateful that we have a community together to remind one another. It's welcoming and revolutionary—who you really are.

There's a freedom and an invitation. And the beautiful thing that the Buddha says when he speaks about freedom is this: If it were not possible to free the heart and mind amidst all the changing circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible—and possible for you—I offer these teachings.

You are sitting at the bedside of the world, the world of birth and death and joy and sorrow, and you're learning how to do it beautifully.

CHAPTER 64

The Bodhisattva Path of Joy (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · 1h01

> *In this profound retreat talk, Jack Kornfield weaves together the inner journey of stillness with the outer path of compassionate engagement. Drawing from his own teachers—Ajahn Chah, Mahā Ghosānanda, and the Dalai Lama—he explores how deep meditative practice naturally opens into bodhisattva action. The talk illuminates the compound meaning of bodhisattva (bodhi meaning awakened, sattva meaning being) as one committed to the awakening of all beings.*
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> *Kornfield shares moving stories that demonstrate presence in the face of life's greatest mysteries: Frank Ostaseski's account of parents washing their deceased child's body, the remarkable 500-year peace plan of Sri Lankan community organizer A.T. Ariyaratne, and the courage of ordinary people standing for justice. He emphasizes that the key to bodhisattva action lies in intention—both short-term (asking 'what is my best intention?' before acting) and long-term (setting the compass of the heart through vows).*
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> *The teaching challenges the notion that spiritual practice means withdrawal from the world. Citing Gandhi's weekly day of contemplation even while dismantling the British Empire, Kornfield offers the Zen saying: 'There are only two things—you sit and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is.' He reminds practitioners that awakening brings not grim duty but profound joy, quoting the Buddha's instruction: 'Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate.' The talk concludes with an invitation to deepen practice while recognizing that the stillness cultivated serves not just oneself but the healing of the world.*

What becomes apparent today, as I've had a chance to speak with various people in meetings and with the other teachers as well, is how much greater stillness and settledness there is in the retreat and in people's hearts and minds. It doesn't mean there isn't stuff of all different kinds, but it's a very different experience to allow this deepening of stillness to happen in the room, in your own body, in your own heart.

Crowfoot, a Blackfoot native elder, says: What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in winter. It is as the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

As you become still, there also comes a kind of opening in which the trees and the sky, the salad and the mops and all of it—they teach you things because you're present for it. There are lessons learned in each turn of the path and each moment because your stillness allows you to be in a very different, receptive, open relationship to life itself.

This part is really important. It's important in some way for the next days that you stay with it and invite the stillness to deepen, invite the layers that want to open to open. Sometimes you get very still and new experiences of mind opening and well-being and joy come. And sometimes you get still and new layers that need to be released come. You just did that forgiveness practice with Spring, and you notice, "Oh yes, there's this whole part that needs to be forgiven, and then that part, and oh yes, myself as well."

You can trust this process. You don't have to do it—you have to be present for it. You don't have to pull the petals of the flower open, but your presence allows the natural opening to happen.

With the teachings on equanimity from Gina last night, you're invited to reflect on what it means to live with a peaceful heart. Even to think about the difficult situations in your life, which you have, because everyone does. What does it mean to enter those difficult situations? What could it mean to enter them with a peaceful heart?

We did that practice of big sky meditation this morning. What we're learning in some way is both how to be more alive and also how to be present not just for life but for death—because it will happen, in case you hadn't noticed.

It's one of the great mysteries talked about by the ancients. They say one of the most mysterious things in life is that people can see other people die all around them and still think it's not going to happen to them. I remember being with Stephen Levine when he asked, "How many of you think you're going to die?" Only about a quarter of the hands went up.

What you're doing here with the forgiveness and the unfolding—the joys and the sorrows that come, the trees and the breath, the salad, the yogi meditations, the work practice—you're bearing witness to your human incarnation in a way that certainly wasn't part of the curriculum in my Ivy League education, I assure you. We did philosophy and science. But this is the education of the heart.

That practice this morning of the big sky, big mind meditation—if it connected for you, which it did for some people—it gives you a sense that you can sit with someone who's in great difficulty and know that they are not their body. You are not your body.

You're not your feelings. You're certainly not your thoughts, I hope, given what most of you think. You become trusting of this capacity to witness, to rest in awareness, even with the things our society turns away from.

A story from my dear friend Frank Ostaseski, the founder of Zen Center Hospice, from his book: He writes about having gotten a call from some parents asking, "What do we do? Can you help us? We have a seven-year-old boy who's been very sick with cancer." Frank thought he would go and give them some ways to be with him. The conversation went on a little. It turned out the child had just died at home half an hour ago. "What do we do now? Can you come over?"

Frank went there, and he said, "I'd sat with a lot of people dying, including children over these many years, but I didn't know what would be needed." Part of what's true when we are in the face of the great mystery of life—which is really what we're sitting in the middle of here—is that we can't know ahead of time.

He said, "I went into the house and into this little boy's room, Jamie's room. His parents were sitting there in shock. I went over and leaned down to little Jamie and kissed him on the forehead." They began to weep, because while they had cared for him as he was dying with great love and attention, they hadn't touched their boy since he died. It wasn't fear of his body that kept them. It was the fear of the grief that it would unleash if they touched their son.

Frank told them about the ritual in every ancient culture of washing the body. They prepared this potion with rosemary and sage and lavender and sweet rose petals, warmed it up, and got towels and washcloths. After a few moments, the mother and father began to wash their boy. They started at the back of his head and moved down his back. Sometimes they'd stop and tell a story about their son—"Remember when he fell? Remember this?" At other times it became too much and they would stop and stare out the window and weep. The grief felt enormous. The mother examined and lovingly cared for each little scratch or bruise on her son's body.

When she got to Jamie's toes, she counted them as she had done the day he was born. It was both gut-wrenching and extraordinarily beautiful to watch.

As I sat with them quietly, a beseeching question filled his mother's eyes. *Will I be able to survive? Can I do this? Can any mother live with this grief?* And I would nod in encouragement for her to continue.

It took a long time for them to wash their son. And what she saved for last, with incredible tenderness, was to turn toward his face and wash his face for the final time. Somehow it was as if she had turned toward the very thing she didn't believe she could bear. And by turning toward it with love, by entering into it, the fierce fire of her heart began to melt the contraction of fear that had taken over her.

He goes on in this story. And of course, I read it and it's so tender and painful—we could weep at the story. And yet it's also our story, because we're human beings. We're born and we're mortal. We have a certain arc of incarnation, and we will die. And within this, with the practice that we have, comes the possibility of opening with courage and tenderness and compassion and mystery.

You sit, and we hear your stories—with your own longing and great love, the beautiful states that come, and also the divorce, the family pain, the loneliness, and the vastness of your own heart and mind. The praise and blame that come to you have come to all people, as have the joy and sorrow.

What you learn is that you can trust awareness itself—that you can trust the heart to hold all that arises. A profound kind of trust grows, a trust in awareness: that it's vast enough and great enough.

When I was in China with Trudy recently, we were teaching at this twelve-hundred-year-old temple. The abbot, who was in his forties—the Shifu—was like a brother. He was a really wonderful man, very interested in how we blend Buddhist psychology and Western psychology, bringing in an understanding of trauma and healing together with the deep practices of compassion and mindfulness. He was open-minded; he wanted to learn.

Part of the difficulty is that the abbots of many of the great temples there—we met several others—are in their forties because the generation before them, all those teachers, were killed in the Cultural Revolution. So they didn't receive the kind of training that generations had had before.

One evening at dusk, we were walking and holding hands, just talking to each other about our teachers. He'd had a wonderful master who is now ninety-one and very old. And his teacher's teacher, Xu Yun, was the most famous Zen master in China in the last hundred years. He died in 1959 at age one hundred and twenty. There are records of his teaching at a retreat like this for a thousand people in Shanghai in 1958 that you can read. Really remarkable.

Then he told me, "I have a little concern."

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "Well, the great master was so extraordinary, and my teacher was, and now it's me."

I held his hand and said, "Yo, I had Ajahn Chah, the wisest person I ever met, and his teacher Ajahn Mun was amazing, and now it's me. And not only that—it's not just me, but it's Spring and Khonda and Celeste. Is it getting watered down each generation?"

We laughed about it. But we also knew that what was happening, what was being taught, is ever-renewing—that the Dharma itself doesn't get watered down because it's born into us. And when I look at Spring and Khonda and Christiana and others in the new generation, I actually have a great deal of love and trust that it will be carried. And not only that—when they get to be one hundred and twenty years old like Xu Yun, they're really going to be wise. They're on their way.

But it was a very tender moment.

Then he said to me, "So do you still get angry?"

I said, "Yo, dude, I get angry. Frustrated. Afraid. And it's not just me. I've seen some of the great masters get upset. I've watched the Dalai Lama chew people out and Thich Nhat Hanh get really upset. And I went to India and I pissed off Mother Teresa—but that's another story. I'll tell you another time."

And here's the thing. There was this contractor working to redo the house I'd lived in for a long time, and we had to go to Europe, and he was slow. He'd promised to get it done, and I had to be there to finish all these things, and he wouldn't finish. I kept asking—nice guy—but nothing happened.

Finally, only a few weeks before we had to leave, I went over to him and I yelled. I said, "Listen, dude, we have a contract. I'm going to sue your ass, get you in court. You better finish—" blah, blah, blah, swearing at him.

And he looks at me and says, "Oh, you want it done, don't you?"

I realized I had to speak a different language—contractorese. He understood that.

And if I didn't speak that language, it was like, "Oh, nice Buddhist guy. Yeah, I'll get it done whenever." No, no—you get the damn thing done, and soon. And the next day, all of a sudden, all these people showed up working on the house.

I remember after I'd come back from the monastery and I was driving again. I was driving down the freeway in Massachusetts, crowded, and a big semi in front of me lost part of a tire. It smashed into another car, was about to smash into more cars, and I hit the brakes. There was a pileup happening, some pretty high-speed accidents. And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to die." It was really scary. My mind was so calm, because I'd been on retreat like this for months and years, very, very still. I thought, "Oh well, I guess this is the day I'm going to die."

But my hands grabbed the steering wheel, my body filled with adrenaline, wrenched it over to the side, through the grass and so forth. My body did not want to die, and it was not taking it peacefully or lying down. It was really interesting to see that, as Whitman says, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

So he asked me, do I ever get angry? Of course. But here's the thing: that's not who you are. It's not who I am. Yes, we can release it. Yes, we can learn to work with these energies.

There's a poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez, "Yo no soy yo"—I Am Not I:

I am not I. I am this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk, the one who forgives sweet when I hate, the one who takes a walk when I'm indoors, the one who will remain standing when I die.

It's a really remarkable poem. It's a poem about soul, or spirit, or something that's greater than all the things we get caught up in during our lives.

And so yes, fear can still arise. I think I'm all chill with everything, and then fear comes anyway. Talking with Ram Dass, he said, "Oh yeah, I flunked the course lots of times." You get to practice with these things. But what you start to recognize is that that's just part of human incarnation—the emotions and the thoughts.

As Khenpo Rinpoche, the great Tibetan elder, writes: "Mind creates both samsara and nirvana, yet there's nothing much to it. It's simply thoughts. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us."

And so we see it in all these stories that come: you're doing well, you're not doing well, you should be improving, you shouldn't, you're unworthy, you're worthy, you're glorious, you're noble, you're a failure—all those, and everything in between. You start to see that's just the mind doing its thing. And it does it on the pettiest level as you walk around. It has no pride, you know.

Julia Child writes, "In department stores, so much unnecessary kitchen equipment is bought indiscriminately by people who had just come in for men's underwear." You walk by something and it just captures you. You see them and you like it and you hate it—the mind does all this stuff.

But as Trudy talked about in the Four Noble Truths: the principle that there is suffering and loss in life and death, and it's part of the game of being incarnate; that there are causes to human suffering—greed, hatred, ignorance, and the things that come from them: fear, violence, racism, and so forth. And it's not just in us, but in the world. The sufferings of the world are caused by greed. There are millions of hungry children and grain elevators full of food. It's not that we don't have enough food. We have too much greed and not enough love. The world is full of ignorance. The world is full of hatred, along with other kinds of blessings.

But what we're doing here is learning to deal with these primary forces, with the roots of them. This from Karlfried Graf Dürckheim:

"The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to those friends who offer them refuge and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themself over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them."

In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening.

So on the days that you have beautiful, glorious, spacious, delightful meditation—hallelujah, that's great. And on the days that you feel like you're falling apart, or you're facing the primary forces of anger or fear or rage—hallelujah to those as well. These too are part of the opening to that which is indestructible in you, and the trust in the body of awareness that can hold it all.

Now some people here—activists, people who have big lives in the world, many people, all of us individually—can be concerned that coming on retreat is somehow a withdrawal from the world, or even that it becomes self-centered. There's the ecological crisis. There's the crisis with immigrants. There's the rising tide of hate and divisiveness. There is world hunger, and there's racism, and there's a spreading tide of weaponry across the world that our country sells a lot of. We sell more weapons than any other country on earth, and then we don't feel safe. There's something a little wrong in that equation. Or even nuclear war.

So how does this relate to that?

In Zen, they say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. The garden is the garden of the world. You quiet your mind. You open your heart. You open beyond the body of fear, the small sense of self. And then when you get up, you return to the world in a different way, with a kind of wisdom and courage.

Gandhi did it, as we know, one day a week. It didn't matter that he was dismantling the entire British Empire—hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating or rioting or being killed or being activated. They'd say, "Gandhiji, you must come and help." And he'd say, "I'm sorry, this is Thursday. It's my day off. It's my day of contemplation. I have to stop and quiet myself and listen to what is the best and deepest and most loving and honest response I can make." It was out of that stillness that the depth of his work and transformation happened.

So when you get up from your seat, you become—chosen or not—a bodhisattva. Bodhisattva is a compound word. *Bodhi* means awakened. *Sattva* means being. A being who is committed to the awakening of the world. Because you sit, you quiet the mind, you remember something vast and true. And you also see—as you could feel in the big sky meditation or in the various forms of metta we've done—that it's all your family.

As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in that famous poem "Call Me By My True Names": "I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond, and I am the grass snake that silently feeds on the frog. I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee in a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by the sea pirates. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving."

Everybody's heard this poem. But it's not simply poetry on a page. It's a reality. The walls of who we are start to dissolve, and we discover very directly and immediately that we are woven in a single garment of destiny, as Martin Luther King said—that we are part of this network of mutuality.

And then when we understand this, how do we act? The key is intention. If you're committed to your own well-being and the well-being of the world—because it's your world and your family—the key is intention. That intention comes from the heart, as Spring talked about listening to the heart.

There's short-term intention, and you'll notice it even as you sit or walk, that before you move or before you do things, there's always some intention. You can begin to tune into it with mindfulness. But it's especially good when you're in conflict or in difficulty. There you are, about to send a text to somebody who is very upsetting, who is upset with you. And you take that mindful pause and breathe and ask yourself, "What's my

best intention?" Then you discover that you want to rewrite it, because your best intention is really to connect, or be loving, or work things out—not just to be right or defend yourself. In your conversations with people, to take that pause and ask, "What's my best intention?" becomes the step-by-step life of a bodhisattva.

Because the heart will answer if you ask. And because you have done the kind of training that we've all shared in here, something in you knows, and you can't lose it. You may think you can lose it, but you actually can't. It's in you.

I think about meeting this guy at the Miami airport when I was on the way to a retreat. He was walking around, and he said, "Jack, is that you?" I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Do you remember me? I sat at that retreat with you in 1978." I sort of remembered him. And he said, "You know, I think I practiced for a while after that, but then my practice kind of fell away, and I thought it was kind of a failure."

"But last year I had a major heart attack and needed surgery. I wasn't sure I was going to survive. There I was getting tested and then rolled on the gurney through the halls of the hospital." He said, "And it all came back. I could be with my breath. I could be with my body. I could be with that space of awareness." He said, "Thank you. It was all in there."

So you're learning something that changes your life. It changes your DNA and the cells of your body—or at least the expression of your genes. It does.

So there is short-term intention, where you can ask your heart and it will answer. And then there is long-term intention.

The most famous example of long-term intention in Buddhist teaching is the bodhisattva vows. In Zen, you sit before every sitting and recite: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." And there are several other vows like that—"Desires are inexhaustible. I vow to end them all"—things like that.

Now, it's a beautiful vow to save all sentient beings. But it's also problematic, as I like to talk about, because you'll notice that the sentient beings you live with and around you don't want to be saved by you. Right? So then you have to think, well, what could this mean if those people around me don't want to be saved by me?

And what it means, if you listen more deeply, is that it is a setting of the compass of the heart, a setting of direction, so that your life and this vow becomes: I vow to bring compassion alive, to bring care to life itself in every moment, in every form I find it, as best I can.

Later on, perhaps on our closing morning, we might do a little bit with these vows, because it's a beautiful thing to do. The Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and recites this vow from Shantideva: "May I be a bridge, a raft, a boat for those to cross the flood. May I be a resting place for the weary and food for the hungry. May I be medicine for all those who are ill. May I be a lamp in the darkness to illuminate the path for all beings. And may I do so as long as stars and galaxies exist, until all of us are awakened together."

Some little vow like that, right? And what you hear is that it really sets the direction of the heart.

That's the traditional vow. There's also a beautiful contemporary one from my friend, the poet Diane Ackerman, that I love to read or recite. She writes: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs—I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

And because she's a fine poet, she has the language to express something that actually resonates in many, many people's hearts in their own form.

So this is long-term intention. When I was at that White House Buddhist leadership gathering, there were a hundred or so Buddhist leaders. Most of the communities had prison projects, projects with the homeless, disaster relief. They weren't just sitting on their cushions. They sat, and they also swept the garden of the world—like the abbots who wrap the old growth trees in the forests of Thailand and Burma with their fanciest robes and perform an ordination, so that the loggers are afraid to cut down any of the trees in that part of the forest because it's now sacred.

But here's something important about long-term intention—really a secret that you need to know. The secret is that what you get to do is listen deeply for a beautiful intention and then follow that. But you don't get to choose the outcome. The secret is to act beautifully without attachment to the fruits of your action. And that's the place of freedom.

Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, wrote this passage I've read so many times, to an activist: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all—if not, perhaps bring about results opposite to what you expected. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

This is what's given to you as a bodhisattva: to plant seeds in the world, beautiful seeds, that you may not see blossom.

There's a story that I love of a man named A.T. Ariyaratne. Ari, as he's called, is the most celebrated and successful community organizer in Asia. He's been nominated for the Nobel Prize and has received many other honors as well. As a young man, he was a high school teacher at the fanciest prep school in Colombo, the capital, and also a very devoted practitioner.

And he saw the great disparity between wealth and poverty in their country, as we might be noticing in many places.

And so he took his high school class out to one of the poorest villages, the lowest caste, to the extent there is in Sri Lanka—not to go help them, but to go be with them and learn from them. To learn how they lived. To have the villagers tell the kids about their lives, but also to learn how the villagers planted and dug and got their water and did all these things.

He arranged in advance that the villagers would give these kids a big banquet, so that they didn't go in order to give something to the villagers. They went to meet them and learn from them, and they were honored by this banquet. It's a really beautiful kind of reversal of "Oh, we're going to go and help these people." And of course they all fell in love. The kids made a project to help them dig a new well and things like that. But they did it together. They didn't do it because these poor people needed them to help.

And this was the beginning of the Sarvodaya movement, which then spread from village to village until it has now encompassed more than half of the population of the entire nation—building schools, building roads, digging wells. And as Ari says, "We're actually not that interested in building schools and digging wells. What we're interested in is teaching people to love each other. And the schools and the roads are the vehicle to that."

There was a terrible civil war in Sri Lanka until about five years ago. The Norwegians were trying to broker a peace treaty, and in the middle of those negotiations, Ari called all his followers together at the ancient temple of Anuradhapura. And 650,000 people came. This is in a country of 18 million people.

He stood up. And I remember this because I was teaching at an event with the Dalai Lama, and I got to tell this story while teaching with the Dalai Lama sitting there, which made me very happy—because, well, you'll hear.

So Ari got up there and he said, "We're in a time of conflict and war, but if we're wise we have to look for its causes. The foolish look at the results, and those who are wise look at the causes of things. And if we look deeply, the causes of greed and ignorance and hatred go back hundreds of years. They go back 500 years—conflict between Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists. Four hundred years of colonial oppression from various colonial powers, empires that had taken over Sri Lanka. And 200 years of economic disparity between the rich wet parts and the poor dry parts."

"So it took 500 years to get into this predicament. I would like to offer you the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan to get us out of it. Five years of ceasefire. Ten years of rebuilding roads and schools. Twenty-five years of learning each other's language and religion. Fifty years of economic development to share the wealth from different parts of the island. And each 100 years we'll get a grand council together and see how we're doing and how to turn it in another way. And I think in 500 years we will be the island of peace that we want to be."

When I heard that story I could almost have wept, because it was the voice of an elder. It was the voice of somebody who says, "It doesn't matter what happens now, and I'm not going to live to see it. And I'm not worried about the latest poll numbers and the focus groups and who's going to get elected and what's happening. I have a vision that we all can follow that is true and wise, and however long it takes, this is the direction we're going to go."

And the Dalai Lama loved it, of course, because of the struggle with Tibet for 50 more years, not being able to go back. It resonated in the way that only can resonate when you understand that you may not be able to fix certain things, but you know what direction you're going.

So this is the work of the bodhisattva. And Thomas Jefferson put it this way: "One person with courage is a majority."

And Ari Ratana was amazing. He's a beautiful gentleman and a sage, but also, he was harboring Muslim activists in his house during the civil war—the Tamil who were part of the group that the central Sri Lankans were at war with. At one point some military came to his door, having heard this, and knocked. His fifteen-year-old daughter answered. They said, "We know you're harboring these people. You must let us in. We're going to take them away."

And she said, "My father has said that if anyone comes to harm them, they have to kill him first. But he's not here. And my mother said if my father cannot do that, then you will have to kill her first. But she's also not here. And I'm here alone with these people. So you will have to kill me before you can come in."

Of course they didn't. And it's one of twenty stories I could tell about Ari. One person with courage is a majority.

I think about that Chinese man with his shopping bags standing in front of the line of tanks—that image we've all seen. Or I think about Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Prize in Kenya, who started planting trees but got on the wrong side of the government, which isn't hard to do in this life, and spent some time in prison—which I think is part of the necessary resume to get a Nobel Prize these days. But she ended up with her group planting fifty-one million trees, because she had a vision of what was possible.

But it doesn't have to be huge. Those are magnificent stories. Listen to this one:

"During my first year of teaching, a girl named Shay was assigned to my seventh grade class. She was a desperately unhappy child and rebelled against the most basic rules—stay in your seat, raise your hand to speak. Shay and I battled for control of the classroom. I tried every technique I knew: behavioral contracts, praise, reprimands. None of them worked. I even called Shay's home every week but no one answered. She lived with an older sister. I went to the school counselor who said I'd done my duty and offered to transfer Shay to another classroom. I declined. Shay was my student and I wasn't going to pass her on to someone else. In the faculty lounge, the older teachers patted me on the back, thankful they didn't have Shay in their classroom.

June finally came. On the last day of school, Shay was quick to head out the door. As I sat contemplating my failure with her, she walked back in. 'Oh great,' I thought, 'one last act of terrorism.' In Shay's hand was a small bowl, the kind that students made in ceramics class. She thrust it into my grasp. 'Here,' she said. 'It's the only thing I could think up to give you.' I turned the bowl over and saw Shay's initials etched on the bottom. 'Thanks for trying to like me,' she said. And before I could speak, she turned and left.

After several more years of teaching, I went on to become a school principal and now a district superintendent. Shay's bowl has never left my desk."

So sometimes it's the big grand things. Maybe it's a tree at a time that becomes fifty-one million. But sometimes it's just your presence with another being going through something painful or beautiful that simply needs another person with them to say, "Yes, this is us. This is human beings together."

And so you start to trust. You trust your awareness to hold it all. You trust the spirit of compassion in your heart, that the heart has the capacity to hold it. The great Zen ancestors say that enlightenment or awakening is one with the trusting heart. It's actually the same thing.

The moral arc of the universe may be long, as we've heard, but it bends toward justice. Sometimes it seems way too long. And then here is Gandhi: "Do not be discouraged. When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there can be tyrants and murderers, and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always."

And it's true both outwardly in that way, and it's also true of the earth itself. A little poem: "When the governments tried to suppress the truth of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the wind told the story. It carried the truth across the nations. The wind became a poet, a scientist, and a prophet."

So there is a trust that things will awaken eventually and in their own time, that seeds planted will grow, and that your task isn't to shoulder the whole of the world but to take what you're able—to stretch your arm out to mend or to plant as the bodhisattva. And not to be too loyal to your suffering or the suffering of the world. Consider being loyal to love. I think you'll find it a much more salutary way of living.

When I think about my teachers—Ajahn Chah, Maha Ghosananda, the Dalai Lama, Dipa Ma, this wonderful woman in Calcutta who was a teacher of mine—they knew how to laugh. I think it's called the laughter of the wise. Yes, they could weep, and would easily, for the sorrows of the world. They had great compassion.

But they also had tremendous joy in life and its magnificence, its unbearable beauty.

And the instructions from the Buddha, where he writes: "Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate. Live in joy and health even among the afflicted. Live in joy and peace even among the troubled. Look within, be still. Free from fears and attachments, know the sweet joy of the way."

These are instructions. This isn't some nice poem. It says you can choose this, and it is possible for you.

There's a wonderful book published this last year which records a week-long meeting between Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama. I think it's called *The Book of Joy*. The central question explored was how these two men, who both suffered incalculable diffi-

culties—the Dalai Lama with what has happened to Tibetan culture and people, the destruction, and apartheid in South Africa, the killings and suffering that Tutu lived through—how can they be happy? And they both laugh a lot. They're very joyful.

They talk about it and try to answer the question. As the Dalai Lama says, "So much has been taken from us—my ability to go home, the sacred texts burned, many of our monasteries closed, our culture oppressed in so many ways. So much has been taken. Why should I let them take my happiness?"

Because your depression doesn't actually help the world. It doesn't serve to be depressed.

In a long poem that I won't read but is quite remarkable, called "A Brief for the Defense," I often read these lines: "If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of the deprivation of others." To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil.

When I've been in refugee camps, the children make these little toys out of old cans from tinned milk with a little bamboo stick in them and roll them around and play games like any child anywhere. It is born in us, that child of the spirit. And to serve the world is not to serve it out of duty, as a grim duty, but to really see its beauty and to be loyal to love.

We didn't do the mudita, loving joy practice. But part of the way it begins—you can even close your eyes for a moment and reflect, you don't have to change your posture, it will just be a minute or two—is to remember that there's a child of the spirit born into every single being.

As you sit quietly, we could work with images of people you care about, but for yourself, let yourself remember your best adventure as a young child. No matter how bad it was in your home or your life, like any child, you had moments of tickling and laughing, rolling in the grass, having an adventure. Let yourself remember one.

May I be joyful. May this child of the spirit born in me be joyful. May my joy and happiness increase. May the causes for joy and happiness grow.

As you do this practice, remember that this is still in you. Picture others—people you know, loved ones, friends—and think of their best adventure as a child, their happiest day. Know that it's still in there. May they too be joyful, and may their joy and happiness increase.

I heard recently of a study—the usual studies—done on little rats, rat pups, at the University of Chicago. I think they were attending the university. It was a study about play, because it turns out that most mammals play. We know this. There's a certain stage where whether it's otters or chimps or bonobos—and the famous ones aside—mice and rats and little creatures play.

What they did in this study was divide a population during a certain period in the aging of these young rats where they like to play and wrestle and squeak and grab one another and roll over. Half of them they let play, and half of them they would interrupt so they couldn't play during that critical period. Afterward, they brought into the cage the collar of a cat that smelled as cats do, and needless to say it freaked out these little rats. They all went into hiding.

The ones who had not played didn't come out. They were too traumatized in some way and never really recovered from even smelling that to come back out. But the rats who had played, who had that in their nervous system, after a while poked their nose out—hmm, I don't see the cat—went back in, came out again, and began to explore and experiment. Because play is really the way that we learn.

So the idea that spiritual practice is a grim duty and you have to kind of fix yourself—good luck. You've tried that. Suffering is the beginning of the story. It's not the end of the story. The end of the story is actually to bring a joyful and beautiful heart to the world.

to stretch out your hand and mend what you can, to touch what is before you.

I remember last year when the first edict came down banning immigrants from those seven predominantly Muslim countries and people were stuck in airports. There was so much confusion and quite a bit of suffering. I went down to the airport with my daughter. She happens to be an asylum attorney. Her work, after she was at Berkeley and became interested first in human rights law and then in this work—her work is basically to help people whose lives are in danger from all around the world to get asylum. She'll have people like a gay man from Uganda who would be stoned to death if he went back. She had a transgender woman from Saudi Arabia who came to Mecca in her mind, which was San Francisco. A different Mecca.

So she went down with a lot of her peeps, these young lawyers. There were more lawyers than there were people in detention. They put up a sign offering free legal advice. And there were fifteen hundred, two thousand people in the international termin-

al. Part of it was the usual demonstration—chanting and signs and all of that. We were there for a while. And then we went over to one of the immigration doors where three or four hundred people were chanting, "No ban, no fear, refugees are welcome here."

In the middle of it was a New Orleans jazz band. The people would start chanting and then the drummer would kick in a little background rhythm and the sax player would play a little riff and the trombone would come in. The chant was going and the music was going. The cops were smiling. The airport security was smiling. For a long time it was like this musical celebration. It wasn't a demonstration. It was somehow a celebration of love.

And so you get somebody like Molly Ivins, the great correspondent for the New York Times, Texas political street fighter, liberal, whatever. She wrote, "Keep on fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce, and when you get through celebrating the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was."

There's something artful about it. I think if we're going to change the world, we can't do it as a grim duty. We have to do it out of the power of love. And it's the same in your practice. It can't be a grim duty. As Guillaume Apollinaire wrote, "Now and then it's good to pause in your pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

And then this beautiful instruction for meditation from Laurie Chapman, who writes, "I like nothing more in the world than sitting on my ass doing nothing. And it's not my fault that I have this attitude because I happen to have an amazingly comfortable ass. It may not look like much, but if you could sit on this baby for two minutes, you'd realize that getting up off this ass would be a crime against nature." This is another form of meditation instruction that I think you would do well to take to heart.

And so, whether when you get up from the retreat you plant a garden, or whether you run a conscious business with integrity, whether you raise a healthy child, whether you're a healer or a teacher, an artisan or a business person or a parent—you sit and quiet the mind and know that this is your world that you can hold in your heart. And then when it's time, you get up and you plant these seeds.

I have a little reluctance in giving this talk tonight. I switched with Trudy, who will give a talk probably tomorrow night or so. She's still kind of recovering a little bit, although she'll be here for interviews tomorrow. And the reluctance is that I don't want to give you a talk that turns you too far toward the end of the retreat, because you're still really in the middle of it.

So instead, what I want to say to end is that this is really important, difficult, fruitful, and at times magnificent work that you're doing—to be able to sit at the bedside of the world and the bedside of your own heart and mind and learn how to really be present and open and find a kind of freedom and well-being that will serve you as you take your intentions out to serve the world. It's really valuable and precious, very rare to have this kind of time in your life. You know that well.

So I want to urge you first of all to stay deep in the silence. And the beautiful thing with intention is that as you sit, in the sitting, you can invite with your attention in these next two days that the meditation deepen. As you sit and start to get quiet, you may say to yourself, "May this stillness deepen." Or as well-being comes in short or longer moments, "May this well-being fill my whole body and the whole sky." Or if moments of happiness or joy come, "May this joy expand. May it open and fill all of this being." You can use the stillness and the steadiness now to invite a deeper level of practice.

What's important is that you remain silent. There are a few people who said, "Oh, we're getting along in the retreat. Maybe I should talk to my friends." Please don't do it. It's not good for you. But more than that, it's not good for the others.

This is precious time. You don't know when you'll be able to come on retreat again. And the world needs you to do this—now here's the guilt trip part, right? It's not just for you. It's for the people you love and the work that you do. To be able to stay with us and truly receive the fruits of practice, because this is the fruitful time now, is critical.

You can invite well-being. It's a beautiful thing—as you get quiet, when you invite well-being or joy, often it will come. Try it.

I'll end with this from Laurie Anderson. She writes:

In the Tibetan map of the world, the world is a circle. And at the center, there's an enormous mountain guarded by four gates. When they draw a map of the world, they draw the map in sand, and it takes them months. And then when the map is finished, they make some prayers and then erase it and throw the sand into the nearest river.

Last fall, the Dalai Lama came to New York to do a two-week ceremony called the Kalachakra, which is a prayer to heal the earth. Woven into these prayers were a series of vows that he asked us to take. And before I knew it, I had taken a vow to be kind for the rest of my life. I walked out of there and thought, for the rest of my life? What have I done? This is a disaster. I was really worried. Had I promised too much? Not enough? I was in a panic.

They had come from Tibet for the ceremony and were walking around Midtown in their new brown shoes. I went up to one of the monks and said, can you come with me to have a cappuccino right now and talk? So we went to this little Italian place. He had never had coffee before, so he kept talking faster and faster. And I kept saying, look, I don't know whether I promised too much or too little. Can you help me please?

He was being really practical. He said, look, don't limit yourself. Don't be so strict. Open it up. He said, the mind is a wild white horse. And when you make a corral for it, make sure it's not too small. And another thing—when your house burns down, just walk away. And another thing—keep your eyes open. And one more thing—keep going, because it's time to find your true home.

So let's sit for a moment.

Remember as well the invitation to sit longer now that you're quiet. Come back after half an hour of walking and sit. If you're awake, sit for more than half an hour. Sit for an hour. Sit up, take a walk, and sit again. Come earlier in the morning and sit. Or if you want it really quiet, go sit in the council house for a time and then come in. Extend your sittings during the day, or do a long walking and then a long sitting.

You're still really in the middle of it, and inviting it to deepen will happen as you stay with it.

CHAPTER 65

Buddhist Psychology

Jack Kornfield · 6h39

> *In this daylong retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Jack Kornfield offers foundational teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) while weaving together practical meditation instruction with profound insights on inner freedom. He introduces breath meditation as a universal practice for steadying attention, walking meditation for embodied awareness, and the systematic expansion of mindfulness to include body sensations, emotions, and states of mind.*
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> *Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that consciousness contains seeds of both joy and suffering, Kornfield emphasizes that the quality of our lives depends on which seeds we water. He explores how our habitual reactivity—operating from the 'reptilian brain' of fear and separation—can be transformed through loving awareness into genuine presence and compassion. The talk references stories of the Buddha's early teachings on 'plowing the field' of consciousness, and the radical inclusivity of the Dhamma that welcomed all people regardless of caste or background.*
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> *The retreat includes a powerful dialogue where experienced practitioners share their moments of awakening and freedom—from recognizing limiting stories about self-worth, to finding compassion during custody battles, to discovering the pause before reactive speech in intimate relationships. Kornfield connects these personal revelations to the broader understanding that consciousness itself is inherently free, and that through practice we can choose to meet life's inevitable difficulties and joys from a place of wisdom rather than reactivity. He concludes with reflections on the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu as exemplars of maintaining joy and freedom despite profound suffering.*

Good morning. Welcome to this day-long retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and it's a pleasure to welcome you here.

Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley, which came from the Nature Conservancy, by the way. Our agreement was that we would steward more than 400 acres and keep our profile kind of low and down in the valley, letting the rest of it be for the bobcat and the deer and other wandering species. It's grown through the collective support and care of a whole community of people dedicated to the twin principles of com-

passion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—that are core teachings in the Buddhist world, but they're really part of all wise spiritual life. Whatever brings you here, it's a great pleasure to welcome you.

The day is going to be divided in a certain way. For the smaller subset, perhaps twenty percent of you who are more experienced practitioners and somehow decided to come back—which I'm very welcoming of and happy about—we will go through during the course of the day the teachings of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of body and feelings and thoughts and movement and walking and loving-kindness. This is a systematic way of going through the teachings that can profoundly change your life. Those who are more experienced students, I will invite you to go out and begin to walk while I do some of the teachings for newer practitioners, and then in the afternoon I'll try to address and work with you particularly, so that you'll have a quieter day. You'll get to sit and walk without hearing all the same teachings again.

This is also being live-streamed, so hello out there, whoever you are on your flat screen. We welcome you. And in fact, we welcome everybody. One of the beautiful things about the teachings of what's sometimes called the Dharma, or the teachings of awakening, is that whoever you are, whatever your background, whatever your race, whatever your culture, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your ability, whatever your humanity—this enormous variety of beauty that makes up our human family—you are welcome. The Dharma gates open and say: this is your place and you are one of us. And "us" meaning humanity connected together through the heart and the mind.

There is another event here upstairs, a smaller one for twenty-five or thirty people, happening at the same time. There's also our winter-spring two-month silent retreat. Past the wooden circle gate, which we ask you not to go past, is the residential retreat area. There are about a hundred people here in silence for two months. If we're lucky, their vibrations will come down the hill a little bit. We can sort of draft behind them like on a big truck on the highway. But please leave them in silence. The rest of the campus and trails are open for you.

I'm really happy to be here with you today and to have your company in this retreat. Also know that there's a whole coterie of high school students joining us today and other next-gen folks.

It's a tough time in our culture and in our world. Perhaps one could say that often, over many cycles in the last centuries. But here we sit, coming to meditate in the middle of these fraught and very divisive conversations—about DACA and DREAMers, about school shootings and guns, about what happened in Parkland and the tragedies we

carry, about immigration, about who we are as a culture and a society and as human beings. Whatever your political persuasion—and I'm not going to assume anything about that here—we gather together in practice.

These things weigh on our hearts, and the divisiveness is so difficult. The solutions are also hard to find, particularly when we look outwardly.

It's quite obvious that no amount of technological development—and I just came this morning from a conference called Wisdom 2.0 in San Francisco, which was a meeting of Silicon Valley people and technologists with a group of people trying to infuse technology with both human and spiritual values, with compassion, sort of open source compassion as part of the project—no amount of computers, no artificial intelligence, no smartphone that has the great library of Alexandria in your pocket along with every cat video ever made, no amount of biotechnology, nanotechnology, space technology, all this extraordinary stuff, is going to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing tribalism, environmental destruction.

The outer developments of humanity, which are now remarkable, have to be met with an inner development of our consciousness and our conscience and our sense of interconnection. Otherwise, the politics of the world plays on the amygdala and the reptilian primitive brain. That's where you get people's attention. There's a snake, there's a tiger. Oh my God, the terrorists are going to come get you in your home. And we let the terror come inside, instead of actually seeing the world with its unbearable beauty and magnificence, with a good heart.

As Nelson Mandela said after twenty-seven years in Robben Island prison, it never hurts to think the better of someone or think the good in someone. They often act the better because of it. Because he was able to see the potential and the beauty in humanity, he was able to walk out of all those years of prison. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit. He changed not just South Africa but the imagination of the world of what's possible.

And the beautiful thing is that it's not Nelson Mandela—it's you and me and all of us. We each have that potential, no matter the circumstances. The measure of suffering that you have, which we all do because it's part of human incarnation—anybody not have that? Raise your hand, you can have your money back—and the measure of beauty and joy that you have.

So we come with this mysterious human incarnation to take our seat in stillness, in the midst of it all, and begin to listen and tend with loving awareness this body and heart and mind that we have. And it's a beautiful thing. Every wise culture knows that

there are times to walk in the mountains or walk by the ocean or go out into the desert or go to the cathedral or someplace and just listen for a time—and not check things off your to-do list. As Albert Einstein reportedly said in Scientific American, if you can drive safely while kissing someone, you're simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves. We live in this wired world, but we have to step out of it, whether it's for the kiss or for the fruiting and flowering of the plum blossoms that have come in this springtime.

Let me share a little story. In the early 1980s, I started a rigorous six-year academic medical program in Boston that required me to work during the day in part and take extra classes at night, with more work on the weekends. The first summer off, I wanted to get away from the studies and work with my hands, be close to the earth. So I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me, and I decided to do it again the next summer.

That year I drove from Boston to western Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend—terrible traffic, hours and hours of driving, and I was already exhausted. My Amish host had delayed their dinner for me. During the meal I tried to act calm and natural, but I felt full of nerves. My Amish host could clearly tell something was amiss, because at the end of dinner he said, "Come with me."

I followed him to the backyard, which bordered an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gamboled around while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa. I did the same. The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. And then out of the alfalfa rose fireflies—a few at first, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars. Heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. I felt my nervousness leave me. The farmer turned and said, "That's for you."

And being here together in some way is for you—to come to this beautiful valley. What we'll do is sit in meditation for periods, twenty minutes at a time or so with some instruction, then do some walking practice, twenty minutes or more, thirty minutes, then come back and sit again alternately, so that you can integrate this in your body.

One more thing to say, and this is actually a passage from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. He says: Your mind is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds—and this connects to that lovely Amish image that was almost a poem. Seeds of joy and peace, of mindfulness, understanding, love. And seeds of craving, of anger, fear,

hate, and forgetfulness. These healthy and unhealthy seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind or your heart. And the quality of your life depends on the seeds that you water. If you plant beautiful seeds, they will grow.

If you water a seed of peace in your mind, peace will develop. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you become happy. When the seeds of anger or fear or hatred are watered, you become angry or fearful or hateful. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow.

This starts to describe both our human condition and the possibilities for us in this human incarnation. We can all hear that truth. And the beautiful news is that we can water different seeds. We can choose where to direct our attention. We can quiet the mind, steady our attention, tend and open the heart. This is really the game. This is really the offering and the practice that we'll work with.

Now, it's not always a pretty picture. I do have to say that. My dear friend Annie Lamott, the great writer and humorist, says, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone"—which is why we've got you all here together, right?

So as you sit, you will also feel the tensions you carry in your body. You'll feel the unfinished business of your heart. If there's grief or tears or longing, love that isn't expressed, fears—all of that is there. What you will find is your own life presenting itself to you without distraction. And then you think, "Oh my God, but I'm getting distracted in here."

Meditation becomes like a mirror, and the synonym we use for mindfulness is loving awareness. The point isn't to have a particular experience today, not even a quiet one where you're just with your breath and everything goes away. May that happen for you for a little bit. But that's not going to be your main experience. Your main experience is going to be sitting with a loving awareness and finding a wise relationship to the measure of pleasure and the measure of suffering, to the beauty that you carry and the fears that are in your heart—to allow them actually to be met and held with respect and understanding.

And then there comes a kind of shift, a shift of identity where you're not lost in each one of those experiences, because they all tell a story. As you may have noticed, those stories are, if not completely untrue, usually rather partial. And some of them don't have your best interest in mind.

To be able to step back doesn't mean you're not present. To actually be more present, not on automatic. This isn't self-hypnosis. This is called de-hypnosis. Because we're sort of hypnotized by our habits. To step back and say, "Oh, this is the doubting mind. This is

the fearful mind. These are the tensions in the body." Let me find a relationship with these emotions where I'm not lost in them, and let me water the seeds of presence, of calm, of steadiness, of loving-kindness or compassion.

Does that all make sense to you? That's really the charge, the direction, the value of what we'll do today.

We're going to start quite simply. In the first couple of sittings, we'll primarily be working with mindfulness of the breath and the steadying of attention. This is a little bit like cleaning the lens on your glasses so you can see more clearly. It's hard to pay attention when our awareness and our focus is scattered. So one of the first steps in the art of meditation, or even in watering seeds—you've got to be able to direct the water—is to steady the attention a little bit.

We use the breath because it's the most universal of all practices and meditations across traditions. Every tradition—in Africa, in Latin America, in shamanic cultures, in all kinds of Eastern practices from the martial arts in Japan to the yogis in India—uses breath. In the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions and the Sufi tradition, the breath becomes a vehicle to tune ourselves, to bring body and mind together. And it's always with us, at least while we're in the body, and available.

The spirit in beginning meditation is not one of grim duty or struggle, but much more one of tending and discovery, of openness. I have a birthday card that was given to me from the drugstore. It's called "The Dalai Lama's Birthday Party." It shows him opening a giant box, looking inside, with ribbons on the ground and these little smiling monks around him.

You don't see anything in there, and he's exclaiming, "Wow, nothing! Just what I always wanted!"

So this actually isn't the place to get something. This is more like the dump, really. This is the place to let go of stuff. Or in another way, it's the place to bring a kind of openness to what you discover. And that is really much more fruitful in learning the art of mindful presence or loving awareness—with everything in your life—and also in learning the deep transformative art of compassion: to let this openness be with you.

So let's begin with a formal meditation. If you've been sitting for half an hour or more, do you want to stand up for a second? Just let your body stretch for a moment. See which way it wants to bend or move. Take a few deeper breaths without knocking into the people around you. Let it wiggle a little bit. If you're shy, you can close your eyes so nobody can see you.

And then when you're stretched, let yourself sit back down in a chair. Let your feet be flat on the floor and sit upright so there's some sense of dignity. You take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. If you're on a cushion up front here, whatever posture is comfortable. You don't have to sit in some weird posture. You're weird enough as it is without adding to it from your spiritual practice, right? It's so fun for me with all these new students—I get to use all my old jokes.

All right, so you settle yourself on the earth here. And when you feel settled and both present, upright with some sense of dignity but also graciousness, a kind of ease, let your eyes close gently. And notice if there's any obvious tightness or tension in your body that you can easily release, and do so. Let the eyes and the face soften, and loosen the jaw. Allow the shoulders to relax and the arms and hands to rest easily. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with the spirit of kindness, compassion.

And as you sit and begin to bring a loving awareness and attention to this life, this moment now, there are these sounds of words and soft sounds around you. There are the sensations of your body, ever present. And there's, of course, a stream of thoughts and feelings, ideas, memories, plans, commentary. Emotions—feeling calm or nervous or excited or happy or sad. Let all of these things be as they are. Let them just be present.

And underneath all the waves of thoughts and sounds, feelings, sensations, become aware of the wave of the breath. How the body is breathing itself in the midst of it all. And bring your attention to wherever you can sense the breath most easily. Coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. And if it's hard to feel the breath, take one hand and put it on your belly and feel the rise and fall in the palm of your hand. You can leave it there for the whole meditation if you like.

And this is your life breath. And the first subject of the training of steadying attention. So as each breath comes in and out, or each rise and fall, let yourself feel it, sense it. If it's helpful to you, you can make a little acknowledgement, a whisper—oh, in, and rising, or out, or falling. But mostly just sense it: the beginning and the middle and the end, and then that little gap between the breaths and the next breath.

And with each breath, rest your attention in it gently for three or four or five breaths until the attention wanders away. And then as soon as you notice, without any judgment—oh yes, here we are—come back to the next breath. And the attention will wander over and over again. And as soon as you notice, whether it's a few seconds or a

few minutes later, it doesn't matter, gently return back to the breath. It's the very coming back, each time you notice and come back, that starts to establish and train a steadiness of presence that connects body and mind together.

Be gentle and patient and come back again and again to this breath, this moment. This breath, just now, arising, passing away.

And with each breath, invite a sense of calm or ease. Breathing in and breathing out, invite the sense of calm with this breath, a sense of ease, deepening and growing breath by breath. Let the thoughts and feelings and sensations be as they are. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. And feel this breath in the middle of it all. How the breath breathes itself in its own natural rhythm. Relax with this breath. Ease. Calm. Invite the sense of presence.

There can be a mistaken sense, just out of habit—because basically we are control freaks in some fashion or other, almost all of us—that the idea is to have the right kind of breath, to calm it down, to steady it, to do something, make it longer, slower, whatever your idea is. Let it do what it wants. Your task is simply to notice: this is a long breath or a short breath, a deep breath or a shallow breath. You're actually in the presence of your life breath.

And what's also true is that this breath you're breathing was breathed by her and him just a minute before. You're actually exchanging breaths with one another and with the badger that I saw that lives on the land here, and the voles and the field mice. This breath dusted the tops of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came over the Pacific and went through the lungs of the dolphins and came to you. It also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. Your breath actually is this universal movement that connects you with life itself.

Now as you do this practice, the attention will wander all the time, and you bring it back. We're trained to have a fifteen-second attention span—basically the length of an advertisement is our training for attention here in this culture. So it takes a little while, and you come back again and again without judgment. You don't have to do anything about it a minute later, five seconds later, three minutes later. You just come back gently, and the point is gently—without some idea of how much improvement you have.

Florida Scott Maxwell, the novelist, writes: "No matter how old a mother is, she looks to her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." We've internalized that mother and father in some way, but that's not the art or the game of meditation. Instead, it's an invitation to presence where you are, to live more fully present.

Now as you feel the breath, sometimes it makes you tight. Try to soften with it. Sometimes it will be tight anyway. Then just let it be tight and notice that. Sometimes it pauses, sometimes it's deep or shallow. It can help to pay attention to the space between breaths, because that's often when the attention drifts off. Or again, you might put your hand on your belly as you're practicing.

I have a friend who some years ago gave birth at home out in the country, and her son died. He was born with the cord wrapped around him and quite blue. They breathed a little into him and then held him and waited to see if he was going to start breathing or not. She said, "That's when I really learned what it meant to pay attention to the breath." And it wasn't even her own. There's something mysterious about being with your own life breath that connects the body and mind together.

It's a little bit like a mirror. As you sit with the breath, you begin to see yourself more clearly. Mullah Nasruddin, the Sufi holy fool, went to the bank one day and tried to cash a check. They said, "Could you please identify yourself?" So he reached in his pocket and pulled out a small mirror and said, "Yep, that's me, all right."

This is what the mindfulness of breathing does. It actually becomes a mirror, because you're there with your breath and then all the stuff of your life starts to show itself. But the breath helps you actually become present where you are.

So, a question or two, or a comment—how was it? Anyone?

"I just thought it was really hard."

That's excellent. What made it hard? I'm interested.

"Trying to keep returning to the breath and trying to stay patient when I just want to—I don't know, it was hard to get back."

When you just wanted—can you finish that sentence?

"Oh, to get up and move. Run away."

Yes. This is beautiful, thank you, because what you're describing *is* mindfulness. You're actually starting to see. We sit down to try to quiet ourselves, and then, like a flywheel, all the thoughts and all the restlessness and all those things—they're all in us. Now, if you can't stay with it, and you did, which is beautiful, then it will never quiet down, because every time you get a little bit restless or something, you're going to move or go somewhere or start a new adventure or buy something or whatever—all the things.

So by sitting and feeling that, which you did, and it's not that easy—we're going to work later on with how to really examine and be present for restlessness and sleepiness and all those energies that arise. Right now I'm just going to name that they're there. It's not that they're not supposed to happen. The fact that you felt it and it was so strong means that this training is actually starting to work. It's like, okay, can I sit in the middle of this and still do it? And you did. So you're actually learning, even though it's hard. I salute you. Thank you for that.

"It was very hard for me as well, and I was wondering if there's ever been a time for you where you couldn't sit with it, where you yourself had to get up, or where you would even recommend getting up and moving."

Yes, there have been times. After the death of a friend I was really close to—there was just a lot of grief. To sit with it was too hard. I got up and I walked. But for the most part, I've learned what we just talked about, how to sit in the midst of it. And sometimes there's really deep trauma that comes and it's better to go walk or do something. So I'm not saying it's always the right time to do it.

But I also have a trust that you all came here wanting something, wanting to learn something. And you are not the first restless meditator. You're not the first—to use Sanskrit, *uddhacca*. You're not the first bored meditator. This is par for the course. You're not the first meditator to weep, or to feel the kind of pain or trauma you carry. And those are actually part of the game. It's actually what lets you become both more compassionate, but also somehow a more courageous presence for yourself and others.

In the next sitting, another tool you could use as you work with the breath—something some people find helpful—is to count your breaths. You can count one to ten, or ten backward to one. But the main thing is to let the numbers be a whisper, perhaps 5%. The other 95% is feeling the breath. It goes: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. I know you know how to count—that's not going to help you a lot. But sometimes it just helps the thinking mind to also notice, "Oh, number three." And then when you lose it, you start again.

Now I want to talk about walking meditation, because you're going to go out and join the other folks. In every spiritual tradition—pretty much in every great spiritual tradition—there are both practices of sitting quietly, tending and deepening, but then also practices of movement that help you engage in the world. Because mindfulness is not a passive thing. It's not, "Oh, I can sit quietly and I'm just quiet and a passive person." In fact, just as there's an in-breath and an out-breath, you quiet the mind and tend the heart, and then you get up and tend the garden of the world. That's called a mindful response. But if you don't have some mindful presence, then your response is just out of

reactivity or habit. When you actually center yourself, you can really respond to the things that need your care, or the injustices of the world, or the people around you that need your attention—you can do it from a much deeper place.

So walking meditation is this. If you were to go to a temple in China, you might learn qigong or tai chi. If you were to go to Japan, there would be meditative martial arts. If you went to India, there would be yogic, physical, hatha yoga practices. In the Sufi tradition, in the Christian mystical tradition, in the Jewish tradition—they all have movements, or traditional shamanic training.

This is the very simple practice. It's simply the practice, instead of being aware of your breath, of letting your steps become the place of attention, to develop presence while your eyes are open and you're moving around.

What you'll do is go out and find some place where you can walk back and forth, twenty steps or so—longer or shorter as you like. First, just stand there and open your senses. Feel the sunlight on your skin, the morning breeze—because it's a bit cool right now. Notice the scent of the bay trees. Notice what it's like to feel your feet standing on the earth. Notice the people around you. And when you feel quite present in the environment, drop your attention down to your legs and your feet. Put your hands wherever they're comfortable, and begin to walk, being aware of lifting your foot up and putting it back down. Not in a particular way, but just lifting and placing, feeling each step. Lifting and placing. Lifting and placing mindfully, until you've walked maybe twenty steps or so. And then you stop. Pause. Center yourself. Turn around. Lifting and placing. Lifting and placing. Mindfully. Then you stop and center yourself, and you walk the other way.

Now, the good thing about this—why you're not doing a nature walk—is because even the most ambitious meditator gets it after a little while: you're not going anywhere. You're just going back and forth. So the point isn't to get to the end. The point is actually to be with the step that you're taking and be present. You leave your eyes open. And if you're walking along and something happens—a deer runs out of the woods or something—just pause. Give that your attention. The pleasure of seeing the deer, the fawn, whatever it is. When that's done, feel yourself here, begin to walk again.

Now in the background, there will be lots of thoughts. Let them come and go, and you mostly keep your attention on your feet. But once in a while—or more often than that—you may be walking, and all of a sudden you think, "You know, I like this walking better than sitting. Sitting is really hard. Maybe I should do more walking, or take up tai chi or qigong. It's going to take me a while to settle down. I think, gosh, maybe I need one of those ten-day retreats. A day is not enough. But for the same price, I could get a

ticket to Bangkok..." And pretty soon you've divorced your spouse and you're living on a sailboat in Koh Samui in Thailand. And then you wake up and you go, "Oh yeah, right, right."

Spirit Rock, yeah, here I am, right? Pause, stop. Let the whole fantasy go, thank you. Okay, here we are. Lifting and placing.

Now, one more thing to say that's important. As you go out, there'll be other people walking around. And it is a little weird, okay? My daughter used to call it the night of the living dead—the zombies or something like that. Don't worry about it. They come back to life later. It's all right.

In one contemplative Christian monastery, a young novice went to the novice master and said, "Master, when I go out in the garden to meditate, would it be all right to have a smoke?" And the master said, "Absolutely not. When you go out to meditate, just meditate. None of that smoking stuff."

The novice goes out in the garden a couple of days later and there's another novice out there puffing away. Our young man walks up to him and says, "Listen, master said we're not to do that." And the second one said, "Oh no, he told me it was fine."

"What do you mean he said it was fine? I asked him, 'When I go out to meditate, would it be all right to have a smoke?' He said absolutely not."

And the second one said, "Oh, I went to master and I said, 'Master, when I go out for a smoke, would it be all right to meditate?'"

Meditate when you sit, when you walk, when you eat, you know. So the idea is that this formal practice isn't meditation itself—this is like training wheels. This is the beginning of practice. But to be aware as your body stands up, as you get your shoes, as you go out—you take it as an experiment. Let me try walking back and forth and feel my steps.

As you come back in, let yourself get settled. Even though others are going to be moving around you, you can begin to settle yourself and come back to the quality of mindful presence. If you like, you can close your eyes and begin your attention back to the breathing even as others are coming around you.

So again, let yourself get settled. Find a way to sit that is stable and comfortable. Through the day, we're really going to be weaving together the qualities of mindfulness or loving awareness, loving kindness as we practice. Sitting, walking, moving—they're all an opportunity to pay attention and to be present in this retreat.

Find your posture. Let yourself sit upright in a way that's stable and comfortable, with some sense of dignity. Maybe take a couple of deeper breaths just as a way to release any tension and collect your presence with the breath. Let your eyes close again gently.

Reestablish now the attention, the awareness of breath breathing itself, carrying from the walking practice back the same steadying, careful attention to this breath. Naturally, you can notice the state of your body having done the walking, moving about—how it feels to sit back down. And then feel this breath in the middle of it all. This breath, a sense of calming with the breath in the midst of all the energies of life. This breath, just now.

I'd like to invite the more experienced practitioners to go out and do some walking while the rest of you stay and we talk about mindfulness of the body and how to include that in the meditation.

For the rest of you, what we will now begin to do is to expand the field of mindfulness, having started with awareness of breath, mindful presence with this breath, and mindfulness of steps.

Now we'll open the field of mindfulness to include all the energies and sensations of the body.

What this means is that as you sit, sensing your own breath and minding your own business more or less, your body will call to you. Often with pleasant sensations—you might feel lighter, or some delicious sense of pleasure, or even bliss. More often with tension or pain.

People say, "Well, why should it hurt when I sit and meditate?" It's not the meditation that's making that happen. It's the fact that you've stopped and you're paying attention to your body and being present. Over the last weeks and months, every time you got into a conflict or a tight situation, there was a kind of bodily response if you weren't mindful. The jaws clench, or the shoulders tighten, or the stomach does. And now you

close your eyes, and that tension that's gotten held in your body starts to release. Sometimes it's from literal physical problems that you have, but even more often, it's from the patterns of holding that we carry.

So the question is, how do we work with these in meditation?

Just as you brought mindfulness or loving awareness to feel each breath, now as you pay attention to the breath, let the sensations of the body and the sounds be in the background. But periodically, one of the waves of sensation—or maybe a loud sound at your ear, which is a different sensation—will become really strong and pull your attention away to that strong experience.

At that point, let go of your awareness of the breath and turn your full attention to receive this tingling, throbbing, heat, cold, hearing, pleasure, whatever it is that's getting quite strong in your body. Turn your attention to it as if to bow to it. You can name it gently. The acknowledgment helps to deepen the sense of mindfulness—"Oh, throbbing... tingling... pain... fire... hearing"—whatever that particular thing is that's strong. As you name it, make space for it to be present and held in loving awareness.

Now, one of three things will happen, especially if it's painful. It might, if you give space for it, move, disperse, and go away. Great. Pleasant sensations the same. It might stay the same. And it might get worse.

That's not your job. Your job isn't to start doing body work and loosen your shoulder and fix the cramp over here and work your way around your body. Your job is to be the field of loving awareness that can allow the body to heal and regulate itself. That means sometimes really deep energies need to come and be felt, and they move around, and you can name them—"Oh, throbbing, throbbing... painful, pain, pain, pain." And once you've allowed it some attention and you're either more at ease with it or it does diminish, then you go back to the breath for a while.

So for now, your meditation is awareness of breath or awareness of the sensations or sounds at the ear, naming them gently and letting them open.

The question for us is, how do we touch these experiences? Do you do it with "I've got to fix it," with aversion, judgment? Or can you let it be received with some tenderness and some compassion? Because the essence of healing in the body is first to get here. There's that line from James Joyce where he wrote, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." The first step is to get here, and then to actually receive the energy and experience of your body with a kind attention. Very often, just that kind attention alone begins to allow a deep healing to take place.

But something more happens with it. This is from Tamara Engel, who was part of the New York Insight Meditation Society. She wrote as she was dying of cancer: "My days are short, and as I grow weaker, I experience so much gratitude for my meditation. Not only the joy and ease it brought, but the hard parts—for every bored and restless sitting, and every fearful fantasy, and every pain and ache I sat through, and every itch I didn't scratch. It was a training for kindness, a training for the muscle of bearing witness, for the trusting spirit that carries me now even as I face my death."

There's a way that your ability to become present for your own body and all that wants to open in it gives you a kind of steadiness and courage, and also allows for a deep kind of release and healing that takes place deeper than any massage or body work could do—although those are very good things. It's the body itself knowing how to open and regulate itself in some beautiful and deep way.

When you approach painful or throbbing or difficult tension in the body, an image to use is as if you were holding a crying child. The child has been diapered and fed, so there's nothing more you can do. And still children cry. So what do you do? You hold them. And as you hold them with kindness, they begin to settle down, and things soften and open in their own way. Maybe you first pick them up and they cry louder. Okay, they want you to know something and they're not giving up yet. Your body may want that from you too.

But if you use the image of holding the pains or the throbbing with kindness, and then curiosity—what's going to happen when I do? Will it move? Will it soften?

Does it deepen? What is it that wants to open in this body? And how can I find the place of loving awareness and an inner freedom of mind that says, "Yes, I can be with all of this and keep my heart tender and open."

So that's the next instruction. Now it's time for you to go and walk.

How was the walking? Did that work for you? Some people are saying yes, some are nodding.

A couple of things to keep in mind. It too can get boring. It can feel weird. Did anybody feel like they were losing their balance? If that was so, walk a little faster. It's true. If you walk slowly—and you don't have to do this slow zombie walk—you can walk faster if you want as well. Find the speed that keeps you most present.

Some people find it very distracting to be walking. So then stand there and close your eyes and take three steps with your eyes closed, or four if you're brave, and that will help you drop in—it really gets your attention to feel your feet. Then open your eyes for a few steps, then close them again. This is an experiment of learning how to be present for your body as you walk. So play with it.

Go out and walk for a bit. We'll ring the bell in fifteen or twenty minutes, and then come back promptly again. And if you have questions about walking, you can come up. Standing up, stretching, noticing even now the movement of your body mindfully. Turning, getting ready to walk out. And please stay in silence. This day really is supported and helped by your being in what's called affectionate silence. So stay as quiet and silent as you would be in a temple or cathedral. Let yourself be present, but without words.

Sometimes as the day retreat goes on, you can begin to feel yourself settling a bit—sitting and then walking again, sitting and walking again. The breath gets a little easier, or the mind starts to come more into the present, not quite so much in its stories. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes instead you get a little quieter, and then in that quiet there's an upwelling of anxiety or worry about your life or someone you care about or the world. Black Lives Matter, or immigrants that you know, or the economy, or the polar bears and the creatures of the world that we share this beautiful planet with. So it can be outer, and none of those is wrong.

One of my favorite books over the last decade or so is called *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Greg Boyle, who started Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles thirty years ago to work with kids coming out of gangs. I know him, and I've actually worked with some of the guys in his program, doing retreats for young men coming from street gangs. Astonishing stories in here—very moving and beautiful.

Anyway, he's also the priest for some of the Catholic churches in the barrios in Los Angeles. And he said one day he was going to do a mass at one of the churches—I forget the name of the church—and he got there and he saw that overnight some person or people had spray painted across the front of the church in big letters: "Wetback Church." A kind of slur, because the church had also been a sanctuary for people who were coming from Central America and other places. It was really an attack on the church.

He went in, and he said his heart sank. He felt really bad that that had happened. He got the congregation that was there together before Mass, and he said, "You know, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for the ignorance and pain of our separation in this world, and the

blame that people give to those who are vulnerable." And he said, "One of the things Homeboy Industries does—we got a contract with the city to remove graffiti. I'll get the homeboys over here, the homegirls—we'll get rid of that right away."

And then a woman, Rosa Saldana I think her name was, stood up and waved her hands. He said he'd never heard from this woman. She was a very faithful churchgoer. She waved her hands, and he said, "Yes, Rosa, what is it?"

She said, "You will not remove that."

And he said, "I beg your pardon. Excuse me." And she said, "If there are people who are cast out, who are judged, who are despised, who are rejected because they are mojados—wetbacks—" and she paused, then said, "then we should be proud to call ourselves the wetback church. And our doors are open for everyone."

There's something in this story that really speaks to what it means to learn the art of meditation, which is more about the doors of your own heart getting open. Whatever is happening for you right now—sleepy, bored, restless, happy, joyful, excited, critical—a few of you are critical of yourselves. I noticed that. I could see it.

The outer forms of religion are what the great mythologist Joseph Campbell described as an inoculation against the mystery. We'll cover it—we're the church or the temple or the mosque. We've got the mystery covered. Now you can relax and go back to business. But the truth is that when you sit, you are face to face with the mystery of your own life, your own incarnation. And how do you deal with it? With all the energies of joy and sorrow, as Thich Nhat Hanh said, all the seeds that are in our consciousness. Can you find the spaciousness of true consciousness, of loving awareness—which is what you are—to hold all of this with graciousness and an open heart?

So that's really the game. Yes, we've started with the breath and now we're including body sensations. We'll move on to working with emotions and thoughts. You take your seat in the middle of the mystery, and it's not a problem to solve but a presence. Somebody said the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity—the presence of that which is timeless and sacred, which is our life itself.

So again, let yourself sit back up in whatever way brings you this sense of stability. It's a funny thing because here I talk about mystery and all these grand poetic things, and then your back hurts. And you're worried about paying that bill or that person who insulted you at work. That's also your human incarnation. You have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number. You have to kind of put it all together in some mysterious way. And the way you do it is through your heart and through your presence.

Let your eyes close gently when you're ready. Come back to be just here—exactly where you are. To be here now. Because there actually isn't any other place but where you are. Compassion is found here. You've got the perfect ingredients to learn compassion. Wakefulness is found here.

Come back to your breath at the center of it all, just as a way to steady and come into the present. This breath breathing itself in the midst of your human experience—whatever is present, the breath breathes itself in the midst of it all. You can let them both be present: the waves of experience and the breath in the middle.

If there are strong sensations in the body, let go of the focus of attention on breath and receive the strong sensations with the same loving awareness. Name them gently: tingling, tingling; throbbing, throbbing; fire, fire; pleasure; lightness, lightness. Let them open, let them move as they will, and you become the field of loving awareness. Let the body open in whatever way it chooses. And after you're at ease with it, made your peace with it, or it dissolves, come back again to the breath.

Just here and now. This breath, this moment's experience. Receive with loving awareness, just as it is. You are the awareness itself, noticing the movement of sensation and life.

But before that, a few minutes—any questions, things coming up?

"So my question is, I can sit where it doesn't hurt, and I can sit a little straighter where it's really intense and it kind of hurts. Which one's better, and does it matter?"

So you can sit where it doesn't hurt, you said, or you can sit really straight and it hurts. I think sitting where you're comfortable is mostly better, but there's something deeper in your question, which somebody will say: well, why should I sit with pain at all? You know, it hurts a little. I move, then it doesn't hurt. Now it hurts there, if I move, it doesn't.

So there are two different tasks. One is somehow to become comfortable in your body enough so that you can do this with some ease. And therefore you can change your posture in the middle if you need to, if it starts to hurt a lot, so that you can be present. Just do it mindfully.

But the other task is also not to be afraid of the range of your human experience. So sometimes—you don't have to make it stiff—but sometimes there'll be pain or hurt that just comes. And yes, you could move away by getting up and getting tea or something like that. But as that poem I read from Tamara Engel says, there's also a power in learning how to sit and be present for what's joyful and what's painful.

And we live in a comfort culture. It's a little cold, you turn up the heat. It's a little hot, you turn on the AC. Your car seat is heated for the cold morning, right? It massages you, and now it asks you, "What else do you want? Can I order your latte?" It'll be driving you shortly, you know? And so we get afraid in some way culturally of how to open to experience.

So mostly sit comfortably, and don't worry—pain will find you in its time. And then it's also valuable to sit with it some of the time. Don't make it your devotion. And for those who have chronic pain, you really need to find ways to move away from it because it wearies consciousness. But some of the time, if it comes, it's also important to sit with it. You don't have to make it, I promise. It'll come on its own.

"Presence when I start to fall asleep."

Yes, you're in the presence of sleep. And I'm going to talk more about sleep at the beginning of the afternoon and how to work with it. But just know that it's really common that you sit and you're quiet, and then your body in some way also reflects what's going on. Sometimes it's like, "Gosh, it's so quiet, it must be bedtime," right? Because we're not used to the lack of stimulation, or other things which I'll talk about.

Because it's completely natural, the main thing is just to notice the sleepiness. And then if you want, you can sit with your eyes open rather than have them closed. Or you can even stand up and meditate. It's harder to fall asleep standing up, although it's been done. And just learn that it's possible sometimes to bring a little more energy, but other times you just go through sleepiness and it's fine. It won't hurt you.

"Sometimes I come up with an image, like I'm on a magic carpet or I'm in a boat, and it's easier for me to not get lost or distracted because I just remind myself."

So there you are in your image. You're floating on your magic carpet. Where's your breath then?

"Well, it's easier to breathe because I'm..."

Because then you're aware of your breath, but there's also a sense of floating. You can use that. That's fine. I mean, people get very creative in meditation. Sometimes when I was first learning walking meditation, I would imagine I was walking on the edge of the Grand Canyon, you know, and I didn't want to fall off or something. And it was playful and it just kept me more present.

If it helps you to stay present, it's okay. But the thing about images is they can then often drift off and—okay, now I've got a magic carpet, where should I go? If it helps you actually to be more present, you can use it some. But the idea is really to feel your own breath in your body. So if it helps a bit, that's fine. Just make sure that you're actually present for your bodily experience. Enjoy it.

One more question, maybe.

My apologies, as I know you said you're going to talk about sleep later, but my question was actually the complete opposite—tips for falling asleep at night when your mind is restless.

For falling asleep at night? Besides counting sheep? Yes, that's its own whole conversation. It's actually hard for us to wind down very often, if we pay attention, because we live at such a fast pace and our screen habits interfere. There are a lot of really good basic sleep hygiene things that you may well know—dim your lights, don't go on your devices for an hour or two before bed, have a regular time.

And then when you finally do lie down, if you can't sleep, then you can meditate. Follow your breath as we do. It's boring. And the fact that it's boring is actually good—it can lead you to sleep. I might talk about this a little more later. We're a bit of a sleep-deprived culture, of course, as people have read about.

So your question points to something more important and beautiful: How do we attend to our lives? Because the speed, the advertising, the capturing of your attention—this is now what's out there with all the screens and devices and news. They want you. They want your attention. And so to meditate is actually a radical act, first for yourself, and then as you participate as a citizen in voting, as a teacher, as a member of society, as a business person—to step out of that unconscious state of grasping that capitalism has, in part, turned into.

So it's not just your problem. You're experiencing something that's really culture-wide. Therefore, you don't want to blame yourself. You just say, "All right, how can I manage and do this?" And you become more the steward of your own life that way, which is both a big responsibility but also tremendously liberating. A little bit scary, but tremendously liberating.

So, a story that those who've come more often will have heard from my friend Fran Peavey. She was a great activist in her day, before she died.

One day she writes: "I was walking through the Stanford University campus with a friend when I saw a crowd of people with cameras and video equipment on a little hillside. They were clustered around a pair of chimpanzees—a male running loose and a female on a light chain. It turned out the male was from Marine World Africa, one of the local zoo parks, and the female was being studied for something or other at Stanford. Who I thought were spectators were mostly scientists and some publicity people trying to get them to mate.

"The male was eager—you know how they can be. He grunted and grabbed the female's chain and tugged. She whimpered, backed away. He pulled again. She pulled back." This is like the modern Me Too movement, right?

"Watching the chimp's faces, I began to feel sympathy for the female. Suddenly the female chimp yanked her chain out of the male's grasp and, to my amazement, she walked through the crowd straight over to me and took my hand. Then she led me across the circle to the only other two women in the crowd, and we all joined hands together. The four of us stood in a circle. I remember the feeling of that rough palm against mine. The little chimp had recognized us and reached out across all the years of evolution to form her own women's support group."

There is something about our culture—magnificent things and also some really terrible things, the kind of unconsciousness and fears and racism and divisiveness and clinging and greed. And so it becomes important to understand that the things that happen to us are not just personal. They are personal, but they're also conditioned in some way by the sea of culture in which we live.

Therefore, to step out of culture a bit, to take your seat as the Buddha that you are and say, "Let me see all the energies, the beautiful ones and the painful ones. Let me step back and not just be reactive, not just be caught by it, but start to be the steward of my own wellbeing"—and therefore being able to be the steward of the wellbeing of others—this becomes not just a personal act but in some deep way also a political act. Because it allows you to attend to the world from a place of consciousness and openness and freedom, which is really where the change has to come from.

So you've been sitting and walking for the morning now. There's sleepiness, there's restlessness, there's this mind telling its stories, there's achiness in the body, breath. There's also coming back over and over. There's a kind of calming that often begins to take place, although not always. Sometimes, as I said, the tears will come or the unfinished business of the heart will arise. But you, in a way, get a chance to be present for it

—present, allowing it, and at the same time, more spacious than your experience, which is what loving awareness invites you to do. And that becomes healing. It actually becomes an act of love.

A student asked about sticky forms of thoughts, the insistent visitors, as she put it. The to-do list and the psychotherapy chair—things that keep coming back and are really persistent.

These will come. And it's really interesting. You're also describing paying attention to our attachments. I don't want to make any judgment about it because we get attached and it's part of being human.

But I remember going out on alms round with my teacher Ajahn Chah as a monk, early morning with our alms bowl. We were walking through the rice paddies, along the little dikes in the fields. And there was a big rock, like Spirit Rock, a boulder in the middle of the field that you could see. The master turned and said, "Is that boulder heavy?" And being a bright young monk as I was, I said, "Yes it is, Master," because boulders are heavy, right? He smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

So that's a little bit at the root of your question. And there's a kind of art to this, because when you get things that are insistent, they come for a reason. You don't want to just push them aside. Whether it's your to-do list or the psychotherapy chair, when something keeps coming back, it's actually driven by some feeling.

So drop below the to-do list into your body and notice what's the primary emotion with it. What do you think it is? Fear, anxiety, right? Usually that's future planning. And so then you can shift your attention from the list and note the fear, which we'll start to do with emotions this afternoon, and note "fear" or "anxious" or "worried," and hold that with kindness. And as you do, the thoughts start to quiet down because that's really what's driving it.

Similarly, psychotherapy can be really valuable, and it's a great complement with meditation. But you're not doing therapy as you sit here. And it's cheaper this way, right? So when the therapist comes in, you can say, "Thank you, I have an appointment next week," basically. And imagine taking the therapy chair and putting it up here next to the Buddha or Quan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion. "You hold this for a while, I'm meditating, thank you." Yes, there will be psychological insights and they're valuable. But if you go down that road a lot, as you know, the stickiness, then it just takes you over. So in some way you're learning how to navigate your inner experience and noticing what needs to be tended to. If it keeps coming back, it wants to be felt in

the body, in the emotions. And then you also can learn how to say, "All right, I felt you. Let me put you on the altar for now. Let me just go back to my breath and not get completely caught in it." So there's a few little hints for a very helpful question.

One more.

"Hi."

Hi.

"It's good to be here and to see you in person because I've read a lot of your books and have gotten a lot of wisdom from them, sir. My question relates back to what you were talking about earlier, before you answered this last question, about the beauty of the world on the one hand and the ugliness of it."

Hmm.

"And I work in a social justice field where I see a lot of ugliness. That's kind of like the point of the work. We're trying to help heal. We're trying to help make people whole. And I was wondering if you had any guidelines or wisdom to share about when to accept reality as it is, the ugliness, and when to fight, because I think I really constantly struggle with trying to make things better, trying to help people, but not having good boundaries about it."

I may talk about this a little bit more later, but let me begin to answer your question. Do you know who Somerset Maugham is, the author? He's quite a famous writer. He says there are three rules for writing the great English novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are, right? And I'm telling you that in some way because you're asking the kind of question that someone might ask: How do I know what job to take? Or how do I know who to marry? Things like that. And no one outside you can answer that question.

What you learn in meditation—and are you part of the Palo Alto group? No, okay. You could be, but you're not—what you learn in meditation more than anything is how to pay attention. And one of the great markers for how to live a wise life is the state of your body. Now it's true there will be certain circumstances. You're a parent and your child's in trouble and you say, "Forget my body. I'm going into the flames. I'm just going to do what I have to do." And there are moments like that where we have to do it. But it's not a good way to live. And we get lots of burned out activists here who are functioning on fear and adrenaline and anger and rage and so forth. And it's neither sustainable nor actually a good place to come from. Because you're trying to put out fire and you're carrying the fire.

So the main thing that I would say is, in due season, to take some time to tend your body and ask. Your heart will answer you if you listen to it.

Your body will answer and say, "How much should I take on?"

I remember Thich Nhat Hanh, who talked about this question. He started in Vietnam during the war with the School for Social Activists, and half the young people he brought together were killed. It was really tragic. But he still had such a passion for justice, as it sounds like you do. And he said, "Every spiritual community should take in people who are in trouble—mental illness or homeless. You should take in people who need help." And then he looked up and said, "But not too many, or they'll sink the ship."

And it's really the ship of your own body and your well-being. So I can't answer you, but what you're learning here is actually the way, the invitation to listen to yourself. Does that make sense? Your body will tell you. And don't let it get sick to tell you. Take a little time before that.

Now I want to do an eating meditation practice. While the raisins are being passed around, I'll talk about eating meditation and then we'll break for lunch.

Here's the instruction and the reason for it. When you're in the temple, here in the meditation hall, everything becomes part of your practice. Life is no longer divided. We live in a very divided culture—the gym for you to work out, business to make money, entertainment over here, and the sacred is relegated to the church or the temple or the mosque.

We live in a society where everything is divided, and the invitation of mindfulness is to bring things back to the center, which is here and now, where you are, to not exclude things. So there is walking meditation and sitting practice, there's breath, there's body. We're going to start to work with emotions. There's mindfulness of relationship and there's mindfulness of eating.

Now, how to do it? What does it mean? Because we spend a lot of time on food, especially with all the foodies nowadays. You go to the market, you buy it, you shop, you bring it home, you put it in the cabinet or refrigerator, you take it out, you chop it, you cook it, you season it, you eat it, then you clean the dishes, you put stuff back away—two, three times a day or more. Or you go to restaurants and sit with people. It's a big part of life, and it's very mysterious.

Here you are in this human body with a hole in one end in which you stuff dead plants and animals regularly to glug them through the tube and make it work. I don't know how you got in there. It's weird. Then you move bipedally by falling one direction, catching yourself, then falling the other way. And the little vestigial claws and tail you have—this is a weird thing, to get a body! But you have to feed it.

Usually we do it on automatic pilot. As Geneen Roth, one of our friends and colleagues, wrote in her book *Feeding the Hungry Heart*—half the time we're eating and it's not really about the food, it's something else.

So eating meditation is an invitation to actually pay attention to this mysterious act of feeding yourself. Here's how to do it: When you go out for your lunch, sit down somewhere, take out your food, and the first step is to sit in the presence of your food and not eat for thirty seconds—or if you're a killer yogi, for sixty seconds. There it is, and you're just in its presence, and you notice what happens. Maybe you're hungry. Where is the hunger? Is it your tongue that's hungry? Your eyes that are hungry?

Is it your belly that's hungry? Is it your mind that's hungry? The world works on hunger and desire, but we don't stop to pay attention to it.

So you sit and you notice what it feels like to be in the presence of food, of hunger, if it's there. You can name it: hunger. And you begin to notice with loving awareness—can I be present without being quite so caught in it?

Or maybe you're sitting there and you're looking at your food, and instead of hunger, there's gratitude. Gratitude for the woman in the bandana in the hot field who picked the strawberries. For the person who drove that truck and brought it to Safeway or wherever it was—or Whole Foods, where they doubled the price for you. And all those people, not to speak of the rain clouds and the earthworms and the farmers and everyone who's made it possible for you to eat that food from all over the world. You feel gratitude. Or maybe, you know, whatever it is—you start to notice what's present there.

And then when you feel really quite present, you also ask: what's right for your body right now? Because your body will answer. Is this the right food? Is this the right amount? You kind of start to listen.

And now you have your food. And then you begin to eat mindfully—reaching your arm, taking a bite of it, raising your arm, lifting, tasting, chewing, swallowing. You make the process of eating as mindful as your breath or your steps.

So let's practice with the raisins. Put a couple of raisins in your palm. And first, just pay attention, knowing you're about to eat. Notice what happens. Here are these poor little raisins about to be devoured. And what's there? Is there hunger? Saliva? What's happening? Is there liking, disliking? Maybe there's anticipation and pleasure. I don't know—maybe you hate raisins and there's hatred arising. You just be mindful of your experience. The dried grapes, the grapes of the vine.

And then when you're ready, maybe take a couple of raisins in your fingertips and bring them up to your nose. You can even smell them. Ah, what's that like? Amazing. You're about to eat these things that came out of the earth and someone picked them.

And then in slow motion, for one bite, let your eyes close gently and place them on your tongue. Chew and taste and swallow them, all mindfully. Notice all that happens, all the way till they go down your esophagus to your belly. See what you notice. Take your time. Whenever you're done, you can let your eyes open again.

What did you notice as you ate the raisin?

One person shared: "I think for the first time—and I've done this exercise many times—I kind of equated the flavor to yet another sensation. And I really enjoyed that sensation of the raisin flavor filling my mouth, kind of being present with what that felt like."

What was the flavor like? Was it sweet?

"Yeah, it was a sweetness that I kind of brought my attention to."

So lovely. These particular raisins, these meditative raisins, are very sweet because you're there to taste them. We can have all these meals—we go out to Italian, Thai, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, fabulous cuisine. And we're talking to each other and so forth. At the end, you're still a little bit hungry because you didn't actually taste it. But this was tasting that raisin.

And in that raisin, there's a whole world. Your teeth bite into it, and then all the wine that was ever made kind of floods across your tongue. There's something mysterious in it.

What else did people notice?

Someone shared: "Surprisingly, I noticed an instant burst of regression to my childhood. The raisins."

Yes, unexpected. That's like Marcel Proust's seven-volume series *Remembrance of Things Past* with the madeleine. Our senses—our smell, our taste—are really avenues to memory. And this again shows us that when we pay attention, all of time is actually here with us. So beautiful. Thank you.

Someone else shared: "I just noticed a curiosity. One raisin was small and very, very dark, and one was large and plump and a lighter color. I was turning them over and just noticing a desire to get to know these raisins that I was getting ready to eat."

That's actually a beautiful comment, because again, we take it all for granted, and it is so mysterious. The amazing thing is that nothing can ever be repeated—those two raisins are different. If you do this exercise a hundred other times, you'll have a different experience, because life is always showing you something new. And that curiosity you spoke of is really beginner's mind, opening to it.

So now you put your raisins in your mouth, you start to chew, there's a burst of flavor, you notice that. Then I could almost hear—you get the elements, the saliva sloshing across the room. Did you notice that? You're chewing, and then the salivary glands start to work. You get all the earth element: the hardness gets softer as you chew it. And the temperature element, the fire element—it's cool, and as you chew it, it warms up. And then the water element sloshes in. You get the primary experience of life in one bite of raisins.

And then you swallow it. But what I noticed—I always notice this—is that people are chewing and then sometimes they stick more raisins in their mouth even before they've swallowed. I saw you. And that's a really instructive moment—Buddhist psychology written right in that moment. There's sense experience. It's pleasant. There's grasping for more. It's like the kid with a cookie in their mouth, one in each hand, wanting more, wanting to keep the pleasure going rather than just being with the actual experience. There's that grasping for more.

And without any judgment—the point isn't that you're supposed to do it a certain way, or that you're supposed to eat in some magnificent Zen way. What's beautiful is the curiosity that was mentioned. You can learn all these things. You watch your tongue. The tongue is amazing—it's moving around and shifting things. Everything we take for granted. And then life becomes more alive. It's not a grim duty.

You know who Maurice Sendak is—the author of *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen* and all those great children's books. He wrote that the children used to send him lots of letters. He said, "I try to answer them all, usually hastily. But I got a card from a little boy named Jim, and I just loved the drawing that he sent to me."

So I wrote him back and said, "Dear Jim, I loved your card," and I drew on it a wild thing holding my message. Two weeks later I got a note from his mother, and she wrote, "Dear Mr. Sendak, my son loved your card. In fact, he loved it so much he ate it."

And Sendak went on to say, "This is the highest tribute an artist has ever received." The boy didn't care that it was an original Maurice Sendak drawing worth thousands of dollars. He saw it, he loved it, and he ate it.

So the point isn't to turn you into a zombie or something. It's rather to invite the same quality of care and attention we talk about bringing to the breath, to the body, to emotions—to bring all of that to this mysterious process of feeding ourselves. And with it comes a kind of communion with your own life, and all kinds of things that we can learn from it.

I hope you had a good lunch, in or out. One of the things that's interesting to pay attention to in eating meditation is at what point you stop eating. Because your belly will say, "Oh, nice and full," and your tongue will say, "Oh, that was really great, let's have a little more of that." And then your eyes will say, "Yeah, and I saw cookies over there, let's go for it." And then your mind will say, "No, no, no, you'll be sleepy this afternoon." And then your mother will say, "Yeah, but you should finish everything on your plate."

You get the entire committee. And basically, what mindfulness helps you with is to hear all the different voices and then to quiet yourself and say, "Well, what's actually good? What would serve this body? What would serve this moment well?"

Before we go on to the next step of mindfulness instructions—which will come at the end of this next period of sitting, how to include feelings and thoughts and so forth—I'd like us to shift the practice for a time to the practice of loving-kindness and compassion.

Because in the most fundamental way, it's not possible to pay attention to this life that we have honorably, spaciously, without being entangled in it, without getting lost—it's not possible to pay attention without kindness, without love. Otherwise, there sneaks in right away ambition, judgment, "I wish it were a little bit different," "Could this be bigger or smaller?" "Could I change it?" When we pay attention, even just as a mirror looking at things, there will come in—because we're conditioned to do so—ways that we want to fix it, ourselves or the experience, or change it or make it different, rather than just receiving it with understanding.

And of course, in a deeper way, there's this famous dialogue that I've written about, and others have too. We had with the Dalai Lama years ago, a group of us teachers meeting, asking about how to help with the degree of self-judgment, self-criticism, and self-hatred that's endemic in our culture. When you close your eyes and you sit there and that judging voice comes—you know that voice.

And he said, "Self-hatred?"

I said, "Yeah."

He was really confused, because there's no word for self-hatred in Tibetan. He went back and forth with his translator: What could this mean? It took a while. Finally, he looked up and said, "But this is a mistake. Why would anyone do this?" And then he said, "All right, how many of you in this room"—it was the teachers—"have experienced this yourself?" All the hands went up. He said, "Okay, I see we have a new problem here to solve."

So it becomes really important to pay attention to the quality of love, because otherwise the meditation can get amplified with judging. Not only am I not really a great person, or I'm worse than that, I'm a horrible person—I'm also a horrible meditator. You know, I failed, F minus or whatever. We can do all of that.

But to heal your body, to heal the relationships you have between people, to heal your heart and all the things that are unfinished in you—the only way to do it is through love. Yes, sometimes there needs to be truth-telling and deep listening.

It's not that those things aren't important too. But if they're not done with love, they don't work, really. You're not really deeply listening to another person or to your own body or your own heart.

Now, the complementary practice to this formal establishment of mindfulness—we're calling it loving awareness of breath and body, of walking and eating, and as we'll see, of feelings and thoughts and the relationships we go along—is the formal practices of loving kindness and of compassion.

How many have not done a practice like that before? Raise your hand. Good. I'm glad you're here. So that means also that a lot of you have, and there are many, many styles of it. You can find my recordings online and in my books, but also Sharon Salzberg and Pema Chödrön and the offerings from Stephen Levine and Joseph Goldstein and many, many other versions—Trudy Goodman, Tara Brach, and so forth.

But even though many of you have a practice, a few things to say before we start. First of all, it's called a practice as opposed to a perfect, right? Because you're actually practicing it. And what we practice, the seeds we water, said Thich Nhat Hanh, is that which grows in consciousness.

Second, it can bring up its opposite. You sit and do a little bit of these intentions of being well and safe and loving and compassionate, and then that person arises and you're like, "I'll never forgive them, I hate them." Or it can just feel numb and mechanical. "Oh God, this is like one more meditation I have to do and I feel nothing. I'm a real failure." It can bring up everything.

So what do you do when that other stuff comes up as you do it? You bow and you say, "Oh, you too. I will hold you with love." "I hate this person." I'll hold that with love too. "I can't do this. I'm no good." I'll hold that thought, that belief that I'm no good, with kindness and compassion. You shift.

Actually, it's interesting because the four most principal states of the awakened heart in Buddhist psychology are love—but when love meets pain and suffering, it turns into a different state, which is the state of compassion. The tenderness of the heart. "Oh, this hurts," and it holds that. It's not "may I be happy and joyful" but rather it turns into a compassionate care. And then when love meets well-being and happiness, it turns into what's called shared joy, a really beautiful quality. And then when not a lot is going on, or when love has been present and you're now just awake to the world, there also comes a very deep quality of peace or equanimity of balance. "Oh, I know how to be here and hold this world in my heart," and things become peaceful, which is the fourth of these qualities. There are other ones like forgiveness and gratitude and so forth, but these are the central ones.

So you can feel as we do this, even though we invite loving kindness and I'll invite a little compassion as well, that with the difficulties, the heart turns a bit toward compassion.

Now, normally when these practices are done, they're done over and over again. And sometimes they feel mechanical, sometimes they help a little, and you do it and do it. It's like the guy who wrote to the IRS and said, "I haven't been able to sleep because I cheated on my taxes last year. So I've enclosed an anonymous cashier's check for $3,000. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest." This is how we are, basically, as people. You do a little at a head. So you don't skip over it somehow. You just do it as best as you can and see what grows.

Now, it's also true that in the beginning of the practice or training of loving kindness and compassion, which involves expressing inwardly some intentions of kindness as you hold yourself or the image of another person and inviting those feelings—they may or may not come, feelings come in their own way—before doing it, it's often recommended that one recite or reflect on the benefits of a peaceful and loving heart. I mean, how do you want to live in the world with its joys and sorrows, with its troubles and its beauty? What would it be like to live with a peaceful heart? What would it be like to live with a really loving heart? And how is it to be with people that you know who express and offer and have a lot of love?

You know, it's sort of like we're drawn to them, like bees to honey.

And so there's a list. The Buddha was a list maker. The three characteristics, the four noble truths, the five spiritual faculties, the six paramitas, the seven factors of enlightenment, the twelve links of the nidana chain, fifty-two mental factors, and so forth. There's a different list of the benefits of loving kindness—a short list and a long list. This is the list of forty. I won't read them all.

But as you grow in loving kindness, your dreams become sweeter and you fall asleep more easily. There was a question about sleep before, someone asked. And you waken contented. Your body becomes stronger and your health grows. Angels and devas will love and protect you, whether you believe in them or not. And men and women will love you, should you be interested. As you grow in loving kindness and compassion, weapons won't harm you, poisons won't work, and things like that. If you lose things, they'll be returned to you, it says. People will welcome you everywhere. Your thoughts become more pleasant. Animals will sense this and love you. And elephants will bow as you go by, slightly. You can try it in the zoo, see if it works. Your voice becomes sweeter and your babies are happy in the womb and growing up. And if you fall off a cliff, a tree will always be there to catch you. That's right. The world becomes full of beautiful beings around you because you see through the heart. You see with the awakened heart of love. And so on. There's a lot more in the list, but you get the gist of it.

So you reflect: What is it like to be with people who are connected with one another in love? Because that's really what we are in essence. And what is it like to plant the seeds to nourish the qualities of love?

We'll do a little bit of loving kindness practice, and you can sense the pedagogy here, because for a lot of people, wishing themselves well—"May I be well or safe, may I be happy"—they go, "Ew, how could I do that?" It feels very dystonic to the way we hold ourselves. So we're going to start with someone that you love, which opens the doorway a little bit. The point in the practice is to start where it's easiest. When you start where

it's easiest and you allow that, then little by little you bring in other people—dear friends, then neighbors. And finally, after you've learned to do it for a while, you can bring in difficult people, if you should know any, or difficult figures beyond the ones you know personally. That stretches the heart.

What happens is you start to get open, and then you bring in that difficult person or figure and your heart goes, "I'm never going to love them. They're just not worthy of it." But then you feel the pain of having a closed heart. It doesn't feel very good, and you say, "Okay, all right, I guess I even have to love them just because it hurts too much to not be open to the world."

And then you can wish well in a really wise way. "May you be free from hatred." Who don't you want to say that to? I think of the dictators in the world—Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or you name them. May you be free from hatred. May you be free from fear. May you know some sense of love. I wish that for everybody. Period.

Anyway, all right. So let's start with a little loving kindness practice and then we'll shift to the mindfulness vipassana, paying attention to our experience. Let your eyes close gently. You want to sit comfortably to do metta practice. It's very hard to establish that sense of love when your back is killing you.

So you want to be somewhat at ease. Let your eyes close gently. I know it's the afternoon and you've just eaten, so there's that little sleepiness that comes in. But pay attention as best you can. Come back, with your eyes closed, to feel your own body and heart and mind—with kindness, with loving awareness.

Now let yourself, as you sit quietly, think of, remember, picture, reflect on somebody that you love a lot, somebody that you care about. As you remember them, see them in your mind's eye, picture them, envision them. Feel that loving connection you have, how much you care for this person. And if there isn't any individual that comes, maybe it's your dog who loves you when you walk in the door and wags the tail no matter what's happened. This being, this one that you love—as you picture them and feel the deep care and affection, then like a soft whisper in the mind, add in the phrases of well-being, these traditional phrases. You can change them in whatever way expresses your own care.

May you be filled with loving-kindness. This dear friend. *May you be held in loving-kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be strong and healed. And may you be happy*—wishing for them happiness.

And again, with these words or similar ones, as you visualize them: *May you be held in great loving-kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well, healed, strong. And may you be happy. Truly happy.*

Now picture a second person that you care about. Bring them to mind, thinking, imagining, remembering them. And offer the same well-wishing. *May you too hold yourself with great loving-kindness. May you too be safe and protected. May you too be well, be healed, strong.*

And to bring in the element of compassion, let yourself become aware of the measure of sorrows in this person's life—their struggles, as in all human lives, their difficulties. Feel that tenderness that comes when you open to their struggles. *May you be held in great compassion, in all your difficulties. Safe and protected. And may you be happy.*

Now imagine these two people that you care about gazing back at you. Picture, envision their eyes looking at you with the same kindness. They wish this loving-kindness and compassion that you've offered back to you. They look at you with the same love. And as they look at you, they say, *May you too hold yourself with great kindness, be filled with love.* They gaze at you so kindly. *May you too be safe and protected. May you too be well and strong.* They wish this for you very genuinely.

They gaze at you and see your struggles, your fears, your physical problems, your difficulties or sufferings or losses. With so much compassion: *May you hold yourself with compassion,* they say. *May you hold yourself with tender compassion. May you be safe and protected.* And then they wish you, *May you be happy.* They gaze at you: *May you be happy.*

Take it in, their wishes. And as you do, if you're comfortable, put your hand on your heart. Receiving their care for you—they want this for you—you can also offer it to yourself. Just as these loved ones want it for you: *May I hold myself with great kindness and love.* They wish for you to do it, and you can take this in and learn to do it for yourself. *May I be safe and protected. May I be strong and healed.*

Become aware of your own measure of sorrows, your struggles and fears and losses, as we all have. Your measure of tears or sufferings. May I hold myself with mercy and compassion. This human life. May I be safe and protected. And may I be happy. The loved ones want this for you, and you can accept this. May I be happy.

As you invite tenderness, compassion, mercy, and loving kindness to grow in you—as you've offered it to these other loved ones—now breathing gently, imagine that your heart could open. If we had time, we could bring in other friends and family and com-

munity and people. Imagine your heart could open to this whole room around you, all these people seated around you, come for a day of loving awareness and mindfulness. Wish them well. May you all be held in great loving kindness.

Let it spread out from you across the room. Let it go out from the room, out across the land, across the trees and the gullies and the streams, to the mountain lions and the gophers, to all the children in the Bay Area, to the fish and the whales in the seas and the Bay, to humans and non-humans, so that this radiates from your heart out to surround this room with kindness and compassion. Like a beacon, a lighthouse shining out in every direction, you are sending the good wishes of loving kindness. May all those in this room together, and all that we touch, and all beyond, be filled with love and loving kindness. May all those around us in this room and far beyond—those we love and know, and those we don't know, and beings everywhere—be safe and protected. May they be well and healed and strong, all of you around. And may you be happy. A true happiness. May you be happy.

In whatever way this invitation of kindness and compassion has grown in you—even if it's difficult and you hold the difficulty with compassion—now weaving this together with your mindfulness, come back to feel the movement of your breath, your life breath. Feel a kindness toward yourself as each breath comes in and goes out. A loving awareness of this breath, this moment. Feeling the breath with a loving awareness, letting the sensations of body, when they're strong, be met with the same loving awareness and kindness. Noticing the other waves of experience with the same kindness. This too, the play of our human life. And you sit in the middle with a great heart of kindness and compassion. Sense each breath, the experiences of the body sensations—these sensations, this moment—receive with loving awareness. This breath, this moment's experience, just now.

For some people, the loving kindness or compassion practice is natural and easy, and it just opens the heart. For others, it feels like an unfamiliar landscape—more frustrating or mental or something. Be very kind with it. Find your own language, your own way. For some, it may not be the words at all. For yourself at night, you might just be sitting and putting your hand on your body or your heart, without any words, just realizing that you can offer yourself some respect and care or tenderness. Or it might be that you stay with someone that you're worried about and love, and that's the place that opens the gate. Be really patient with it. But it's quite transformative.

I love the story of Sharon Salzberg, my dear colleague and friend. She was teaching over in Oakland when Jerry Brown had that center near Jack London Square called We the People, before he became governor. She did a day of loving kindness, and there was

a woman who raised her hand and said, "This stuff just feels so mechanical and dry." Sharon said, "Well, why don't you just go out and walk, and as you walk and you see people going by, offer them a little loving kindness"—which is the instruction for walking now as you go out in a minute. The woman said, "Okay, I'll go try."

So she went across the street to Jack London Station where the trains come in, and she was just walking back and forth doing her metta, feeling like it's dry, nothing's coming, no good feeling. And a train pulls in, and a guy toward the end of the train in a business suit with a briefcase walks down the long platform. He walks right up to her and says, "Excuse me, ma'am. I've never done this before, but I'm facing a really tough situation in my life, and you look so kind and peaceful. Would you offer a prayer for me?" She said, "Maybe this stuff works, you know."

So play with it. Explore. Experiment with it.

perspective of what to do with the different energies that arise as you're sitting here minding your own business, and all of a sudden the whole storm of thought or anxiety or some unfinished memory or guilt or grief or longing or love—all the things that make you human—all that stuff comes up.

So some years ago, I hate to say how many years ago, at the early stages of the American-Iraq war, a small unit of American soldiers, Army and Marines, were walking along a street in the holy city of Najaf when hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side. Fists waving, throats taut, they pressed in on the twenty-four Americans, who glanced at one another in terror. The journalist was afraid a shot would ring out and some great massacre would take place. This was written in the New Yorker magazine, by the way.

And at that moment, an American officer stepped through the crowd, now nearly a thousand, shouting at them. He held his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground. Against the backdrop of the seething crowd, it was a striking gesture, almost biblical.

"Take a knee," the officer said. Behind his sunglasses, the soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy. And then one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the boiling crowd and pointed their guns at the ground. The Iraqis fell silent. Their anger subsided. And the officer ordered his men to withdraw.

It took me two months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes. And when I found him, I asked him who had taught him to tame an angry crowd in a distant country in this way. He assured me that it wasn't part of the Army Manual of Instruction. "But warning shots," he said, "couldn't work. Problem is, the next thing you know, you

actually have to start shooting people." And then he paused for a moment. "The Iraqis who were there in their holy city in Najaf felt that our presence was already disrespecting their mosque and their culture. The obvious solution," he went on, "was a gesture of respect."

And so when I talk about sitting with the sensations and bowing to them, or when the different emotions and experiences come, offering a gesture of respect—to say, "Oh yes, you too are part of this human life, this human incarnation, and I can include you in my loving awareness, in my understanding."

So what will come, as you've already noticed, sometimes it's sleepiness, and you think, "Oh God, I'm no good at this." If you were to go to Kyoto, to the great Zen monasteries, or to India to these wonderful ashrams, or to Burma, in the afternoon after lunch, you'd look at these great Zen students and these great yogis, and they're nodding like this. One will nod and the other will straighten up and then somebody else will start nodding. It's because you're human. And you're particularly tired. You know why? Because you've been running around, and you get quiet, and your body says, "Hey, remember me? How about a little rest, please?"

So you don't want to judge it. It's just an energy, and sometimes you're sleepy, and that's fine. You notice it with mindfulness. You can open your eyes. You can even stand up and meditate if you're really sleepy, or keep your eyes open while you stand. And that might help, might not, but you can try it. Or you can go out and walk a little more briskly. But mostly you just see: this is what's happening. Sleep is like this. And you don't judge it.

Then the opposite comes. You're sitting here and you are restless. You're bored. "Oh my God, I'm so restless. I've got to get out of here. Got to get out of here." What to do when that comes? Just as you can acknowledge sleepiness—you can name it, "sleepy, sleepy"—you can acknowledge restlessness or boredom. You sit here and you feel restless. And what's it like in your body? "Oh, I've got to get up. Restless, restless, restless, restless." And often just by acknowledging it, things start to settle down, because that's what happens.

They come in waves. But the thing is, if you don't pay attention to these states and you get restless or bored or lonely, and you're worried or afraid about it somehow, then it kind of takes you over. You're home and you get a little restless or bored, and what do you do? You open the refrigerator. You go online. You do all that stuff. You know what I'm talking about, right? Because you can't be with yourself.

If you're lonely, be lonely. Do it right. The poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few ingredients can."

If you're bored, be bored. Okay, I'm bored. I feel like I'm going to die of boredom. I'm restless. I'm dying of restlessness. When it gets really bad, here's what you do. You say, "All right, I'll be the first person in 2018 to die of boredom and restlessness at Spirit Rock. Take me." Let me see what happens. And the minute you say, "Okay, take me, I'll die of boredom or restlessness"—you know what happens? It gets easier, because most of the problem is your resistance to the experience. "Oh, bored, but dying, dying, dying... Restless, dying, dying, dying... Dying, okay... Gee, I wonder where I should go for dinner." Because the mind has no pride. You die and then it's making plans, right?

Or you notice that there's fear that comes. And as Hafez, the great poet, says, "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions." So what you do is name it: fear. You feel those sweaty palms, the tightness. Fear, fear. You just acknowledge it. If you do it twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred times, at some point it comes to, "Oh, fear. I know you. Yeah, this is just fear. Thank you. Fear is like this." And you become bigger than the fear.

Or maybe it's wanting and desire. You think, "Oh, I read those spiritual books. You're supposed to get rid of desire, right?" How weird. How could you live without some healthy desire? There's healthy and unhealthy desire. It's kind of like, as my poet friend Alison Luterman writes, you're on a diet and you hide the chocolate chip cookies. Meanwhile, you're the only person in the whole galaxy who knows where those chocolate chip cookies are hidden, right? Desire is part of human incarnation.

So instead you sit and you say, "Desire, desire, desire... Oh God, I hate feeling desire. Hating, hating. I wish it would go away. Wishing, wishing. More desire, desire. Longing, longing. I'm going to die of this. Dying, dying. But I'm doing pretty good. Oh, pride, pride." And you just see the states as they come and as they go.

Or the judging mind.

I don't want to judge. I hate myself for judging. I judge myself so much. I should stop judging. It's no good to judge. I'm a terrible person. And I judge all those other people. But what's that? It's more judgment, right? I've got to get rid of this judgment.

So what can you do? You bow and you say, "Oh, judging mind. That's what it is. Thank you for your opinion. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm good for now." And you know whose voice is in there—we won't talk about them—but somebody taught you that and recorded that judging in there. "Thank you for your opinion. I'm good for now. Thank you." And then you go back to your breath.

Or the doubting mind: I can't do it. It's too hard. Everybody else—all 398 other people—are sitting like they're awakened masters. And I'm sitting here restless and tired and sleepy. I can't do it. Maybe I should do Sufi dancing. It's more fun. All those thoughts, that's the doubting mind. "Oh, doubting mind is like this." Because if you don't know how to deal with your own doubt, you can't actually marshal your energy and direct it, can't plant the seeds and water the seeds that Thich Nhat Hanh talked about.

So you gradually learn that all these are energies of life.

The same with thoughts. You're sitting there and planning comes. Planning mind. If you name it—"planning, planning"—it dissolves like fog under sunlight. Remembering. You name it "remembering," and you don't have to go into the memory. You don't have to go to Chicago and relive that bad family reunion. You just note "remembering," thank you, and let it dissolve for now. Later you can work that out in therapy, but for now you just let it go.

As Hafiz writes, "The mind is ever a tourist wanting to touch and buy new things and toss them into an already filled closet."

So you let these come. You acknowledge them, you let them dissolve as they do. And you become the space of loving awareness that's there with your breath. Then when a strong sensation arises, or a mood of sadness or excitement or love or longing comes, or it's the planning mind or the doubting mind, you name it. Let go of the breath. "Oh, doubting mind, doubting, doubting." It dissolves and you feel your breath for a while. And then, "Oh, but I'm so sad about it." And you notice, "Sad, sad, sad." But then the sadness turns into tenderness maybe. "Oh, tenderness now. I like this."

Oh, liking, liking. Thank you. Bow to it. Then back to your breath for a time.

And you become the space of loving awareness. You become the Buddha, or the Bodhisattva of infinite compassion, that can sit with the energies of your life. And because you learn to do this, you can then sit with the energies of others' lives. You can tend the world differently.

As you walk, these energies will come. When they do, you can just stop and name them—sad, or excitement, or longing, or love, whatever it is—and let that be part of it, then walk again. Or if you wish, as you walk, you can do a little metta, loving-kindness, and wish well for those bipedal beings walking around you, or other beings that you see, for a little bit, and then back to your steps. You get to play with your attention—being present to your body, acknowledging the waves of experience as the loving awareness, and then offering little blessings of metta and kindness to people.

Alan Watts says, "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists of being sensitive to each moment and regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and the heart wholly receptive."

This art of living is supported by, held in the field of mindfulness, of loving awareness that we're practicing—to be present for our own breath and body, for our thoughts and feelings. In that way, we can sit, walk, do our loving-kindness, and then bring that same caring attention to our relationships with others and to our relationship with the whole vast world around us.

But this step that we're doing today especially—of quieting the mind, tending the body, listening to the heart—boy, the world needs this. I just hope it goes up the chain of command somehow.

So let's continue sitting with this spirit of mindfulness, including the strong feelings or states of mind as they arise, with the same care and attention you've given to the breath or sensations of the body.

While in some ways you may be getting a little weary—okay, it's a long day of meditation—let yourself notice the moments where there's some peacefulness or some well-being. Notice the moments where you feel like, oh, there's some balance coming. Even if it's just for a breath or two or three, they will come. Dwell in them a little bit. Let them buoy you up. Rest in them. Start to feel that you can inhabit the sense of well-being as you sit here, when it comes.

This breath, this moment's experience, just now.

Make sure the mindfulness has the spirit of loving-kindness with it, in it. Bring in the practice and quality of loving-kindness and compassion, tenderness for the last part of this sitting—especially to yourself, and those you care about.

There is something about the stillness that grows that is worth tending to, and in some cases preserving or staying with.

For those who are more experienced practitioners, I'd like to start with a two-line chant that's part of the morning and evening chanting in the monasteries and temples where I practiced. The line goes: *Svakato bhagavata dhammo sanditiko akaliko ehipasiko opanayiko pachatangve titapu vinyuhiti.*

The translation is: "Honoring of the teachings of the Dharma, of the truth, which is open-handed, immediate, visible to the wise, bringing benefit here and now, offering liberation to all who turn their hearts to it—with nothing kept back, nothing hidden."

It's a kind of celebration of the possibility of freedom for us.

I love reading poems when we get quiet, because there's a way in which poetry is the music of language. William Carlos Williams wrote, "You can't get the news from poems, but men and women die every day for lack of what is found there." It's not like turning on the news—it's hearing something much deeper and wilder.

From Carl Sandburg, "Wilderness":

There's a wolf in me—if you haven't noticed in yourself—fangs pointed for tearing gashes, a red tongue for raw meat, the hot lapping of blood. I keep the wolf because the wilderness gave it to me, and the wilderness will not let it go.

There's a fox in me, a silver gray fox. I sniff and guess and pick things out of the wind and air, and nose in the dark night, and circle and loop and double cross.

There's a hog in me, a snout and belly, machinery for eating and grunting, machinery for sleeping satisfied in the sun. I got this too from the wilderness, and the wilderness will not let it go.

There's a fish in me from salt blue water gates. I scurried with shoals of herring and water spouts with porpoises. There's a baboon in me, clambering, clawed, dog-faced, yapping a jealous hunger, harrowing under the armpit.

There's an eagle in me and a mockingbird. And the eagle flies among the rocky mountains of my dreams and fights among the Sierra crags, the cut crags of what I want. And the mockingbird warbles in the underbrush of my Chattanoogas of hope. And I got an eagle and the mockingbird from the wilderness.

Oh, I got a zoo, a menagerie inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red valve heart. And I got something else. It's a man heart, a woman child heart. It's a father and mother and lover, came from God knows where, going to God knows where. For I am the keeper of the zoo, and I say yes and no, and I sing and touch and love, and I am a pal of the world. For I came from the wilderness, and the wilderness will not let me go.

If we could put a little speaker on the side of your head for what went on while you were looking so calm and peaceful over the course of this day, people sitting near you would at first turn their heads and say, "Really?" And then they'd start to move their chairs over to one side. Because the zoo is in there. We contain it all. And as Thich Nhat

Hanh said, from where we started: What are the seeds that we will water? Where do we get lost, confused, caught in hatred and ignorance? And what are the seeds that we will water?

One of the earliest descriptions of the Buddha's teachings, from the first years of his wandering: In the morning on alms round, he took his bowl and came by a field that was being plowed by a very wealthy Brahmin. At the end of the plowing, they gathered everyone to offer them food. The wealthy Brahmin looked at him and said, "Hey monk, I plow the land, I sow the seeds, and having worked in this way, I eat. Why don't you do a little plowing and sowing, and then you would eat too?" Like, "Stop being a beggar and get a life."

And the Buddha replied, "I too, oh Brahman, plow and sow, and having done so, I eat."

Now the Brahmin landowner got interested. He said, "You claim to be a plowman, but I see no plow. Tell me, what kind of plowing is it you do?"

And the Buddha replied: "Trust or faith is the seed, compassion the rain. Wakefulness, my plow and yoke. Conscience, my guide. My own mind is the harness. Clarity is the plow blade and goad. Well guarded in action and speech, I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is the oxen drawing the plow toward freedom without regret. This is how I plow. And it bears the fruit of the deathless—a freedom that can be touched by nothing. Whoever plows in this way becomes free of entanglement in all sorrow and distress."

Well, he was convincing. The Brahmin said, "Let me offer some milk rice to you," and poured it into the bowl. But as the myth goes—you can think of this mythologically—the rice wouldn't stay in the bowl. The bowl hissed and it all splattered out. And one wonders, why did that happen? Why was the bowl hot like that, so that the milk rice would splatter out?

Have any of you ever plowed a field? So interesting—we're so far from our roots. A few people have. Tell me, what's the plow like at the end of a long furrow? Just one word.

It's hot. That steel of the plow cutting through the earth—by the end of opening the earth in that furrow to plant the seeds, it gets really hot. And so this image is that the bowl was hot because the Buddha had been doing his plowing. It's a really lovely, poetic play with language. "I too have done my work, and you don't even have to bother to feed me."

I'm beyond all of that, you know, beyond judgment of what you have. But there's something really beautiful in it.

Like that verse I read from Thich Nhat Hanh at the beginning of the day—that we have all these potential seeds in our fields. And which ones will we water?

Another little text for you, just to follow this thread:

Others will be cruel. We will not be cruel. Thus we should incline and direct the heart.

Others will kill. We will not kill. Thus we should incline and direct the heart.

Others will take what's not given. We shall abstain from this. Thus we shall direct and incline the heart.

Others will speak falsehoods. We shall speak truth. Thus we should incline and direct the heart.

Others will be fraudulent. We shall be honest. Thus we should incline and direct the heart.

Others will be hateful. We shall be compassionate. Thus shall we incline and direct the heart.

Others will lack wisdom. We will cultivate wisdom. Thus we should direct the heart.

This is another language for the sowing of seeds, for the watering, for the directing of consciousness itself. Because we have a choice as human beings. We can get caught by the reptilian brain—you know it very well. The fight, flight, or freeze. Fear and separateness, what's called the small sense of self, blocked off from the world. Or we can say: This is us. This is our family. This is our planet. This is life. We are part of it, and we're all in it together.

We can blame others. It's their fault. But I remember, again, being in the monastery. There was some big wedding in a village, the closest village to the temple, and loudspeakers with music were blaring while we were trying to be peaceful. Mostly we were in this remote forest, but there were a couple of little villages nearby. And somebody complained to the teacher, Ajahn Chah, about all the noise.

He said, "I have a question. Who's bothering whom? Is the noise bothering you, or are you bothering the noise? Where does the difficulty come from?"

Or if somebody was angry, he said, "Hmm, you're angry. Who's bothering whom in that?"

Because the one thing we have the great capacity to do is to tend our own heart. And you will have praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, birth and death, sweet and sorrow. There will be tragedies and there will be suffering, and there will be beauty and love. That's what makes up your incarnation, your human life.

Now there's something deeply political again about all of this. James Baldwin writes: "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

And because we can't bear the insecurity of being human—is anybody really secure? Raise your hand, come on, fess up. You're not. Life in its nature is uncertain, isn't it? What's going to happen tomorrow? No one knows.

How long will you live? No one knows. What is consciousness? Life is really uncertain. The only thing you know for sure is that you're going to die. But the big question is when. A long time away, a short time, and then all of a sudden—oh, surprise—it's your time.

What Baldwin says is that if we can't bear uncertainty, if we can't bear our measure of the grief or the tears that's given to every human being, then we project it onto others. And so it's the enemy du jour. It's the immigrants. It's the Mexicans. It's the Muslims. It used to be the communists when I was a kid—now they're coming back around again. It's a new popular meme. Let's hate the communists, or whatever. It's the black people. It's the brown people. It's the yellow people. It's somebody else who's different than us. And so we project our insecurity because we can't bear our human condition, our human incarnation.

Your ability to sit as you have in practice over the time that you have in this way gives you a great strength or power, a capacity, which is a kind of freedom and an ability to love in this life. Because who are you really? Your consciousness. Your spirit that was born into this body. You're not your body. I hope you know that. You're not made of brown rice and Big Macs. It's just not who you are. And you're certainly not your feelings, because they're always changing, right? You're happy and sad and angry and loving. Maybe you're your thoughts. Come on. You know the cartoon in the New Yorker that shows a driver going across the vast Utah desert, with a roadside billboard that says, "Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles." It's like meditation, right? The mind just streams thoughts, secretes thoughts like the salivary glands secrete saliva. So you're not these. Who are you really? You are spirit, you are consciousness. And consciousness contains all things. It's connected with all things. When you remember this, then those prejudices and fears and confusions—all those things—they drop away.

One of the stories that I love—I'm reading some very classical Buddhist texts for this more experienced group—is about Ananda, who was the cousin and attendant to the Buddha, at least as all these stories are told. Ananda, having been sent by the Blessed One on a mission, was returning past a well near a village. Seeing Bhakti, a young untouchable woman, an outcast, he asked her for a drink of water.

Now, if you think about prejudice, which we have plenty of in our own culture, it takes the form—or did, and still does—of Indian caste. If you're born into a lower caste, it used to be that even if your shadow passed over the food of a high caste person, it would pollute it. Imagine a child being told your shadow will pollute something.

So Bhakti says, "Oh, venerable monk, I am too lowly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask anything of me, lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am an untouchable."

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for caste, but for water, please."

The woman's heart leapt joyfully, and she gave Ananda water to drink. He thanked her and went away. But she followed him, and hearing that he was a disciple of the Buddha, she went to the Blessed One and said, "Help me please live and dwell near where your disciple Ananda is, that I may see him and tend to him, for I have fallen in love with Ananda." It happens, you know.

The Blessed One understood the emotions of her heart and said, "Bhakti, your heart is full of love, but you do not understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you, and practice it toward others."

Follow this path of justice and righteousness, and your good heart will outshine the royal glory of kings and queens.

This story really goes back to the original founding of Buddhist teachings, which welcomed everyone from every caste and race. All were called nobly born. You who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are.

So then, what is freedom in this? Freedom is not to be trapped by the emotions and perspectives and prejudices, not to water the seeds of judgment and hatred. But to encounter each person and see somehow their secret beauty—to see, "Born in this person, wow, I wonder who's behind those eyes." And that one, and that one, and that one, living this mysterious life. Then it allows for a kind of deep kinship to arise.

And of course, it's not going to be how you want. Some people will like you, some won't, some will leave you. Human beings are an unpredictable lot. But you get to tend your heart.

There's a story I heard recently from Frank Ostaseski, a good friend who started Zen Center Hospice. His book, *Five Invitations*, is in our bookstore—it's a great book. It was about a woman whose work was in the publishing industry in New York. Her mother had lost more and more of her memory through Alzheimer's and become unable to care for herself well. So she moved her mother in with her in her apartment and got a caregiver.

She came home from work one day and all her precious books—she had a great library of precious books—were spilled out on the floor, tumbling out of different boxes. She walked in and her mother looked at her and said, "I'm tired of all these old dusty books. I'm going to give them to my dentist." That was the state of mind she was dealing with.

Jillian, the woman, got really upset at the caregiver and said, "How could you do this? My precious books, and my mother's taking them away!" Really angry. But the caregiver was not in that state at all. She said, "Madam, today I pack the books up, tomorrow I unpack the books. If this gives a woman who has so little sense of control even a moment of some satisfaction—that she can direct something—well, I will go along with her. Because this too is important, and I just like being with her. It's fine, thank you."

And you can hear how much love there is in that response.

Oh, we think the world has to be the way that we want it to be. And I don't mean that you don't stand up for justice or protect those who are vulnerable. But there are different ways to do it. You can do it out of your anger or out of your fear. Or you can do it out of love. And that love comes from this inner sense of freedom that you always have, because consciousness in its nature is free. You can get identified with things and get caught in them, but freedom remains available.

Consider this story of a woman named Sarah, a single mom with two kids. Her eight-year-old daughter Alicia had leukemia. Of course, Sarah got incredibly anxious and terrified and worried, already grieving what might be the loss of her child's health, scared that she would lose her. For the first whole year, Alicia went through the long rounds of chemotherapy and hospital stays and doctors, and her mother and the whole house were filled with sadness and fear and anxiety coloring the days.

Then one afternoon when they were out on a walk, Alicia said, "Mama, I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I want them to be happy days."

It was like a splash of cold water on the mother's face. She realized she had to step out of the drama of leukemia, the melodrama and all her fear, and meet her young daughter where she was. She grabbed her and they started to dance outside, and she said, "Yes, we will do this."

And of course, Alicia is now twenty-three years old. She graduated from college. She made it. She's okay. But even if she didn't, what kind of days would you have wanted for her? And what kind of days would you have wanted for her mom?

When I was eight or nine years old, just around that time, my twin brother—whom I loved very much, who died last spring, also from blood cancer—he was much bigger and much more robust than I was. I was kind of very skinny. Here's the comparison.

He played football quite successfully, and I played oboe in the orchestra. But at that time we were eight years old, and we were living in Buffalo, which has a lot of snow coming in off the lakes. We had this big, wild winter storm. It was very cold. We all wrapped up like boys do and went out to play in the snow. I was shivering—I was so skinny and just shivering and shivering. He looked at me and said, "You're cold." I said, "Yeah." He said, "It's not cold." And he took off his hat. "It's not cold." He took off his scarf. Then he took off his jacket. "It's not cold, it's just in your mind."

Pretty soon he was stripped to the waist in the middle of this blowing windstorm, dancing around and saying, "It's not cold, it's just in your mind!"

That's who he was as a person. He was a great adventurer, a world explorer. He was a member of the Explorers Club—those people who walk to the South Pole and climb different mountains. He actually explored the underwater lakes of the world: Lake Baikal, Lake Titicaca in the Andes, Lake Malawi in Africa. He spent a year there doing the underwater genetics of that lake. He was a geneticist and environmental biologist.

And it was so beautiful because it was the teaching of what kind of spirit do you meet your life with. What does it mean to have a free heart? To love another person? As Ananda's story showed, to be able to meet and see the beauty in every person you encounter, or to at least meet them respectfully, even if they're lost in themselves or operating in some other way. As Nelson Mandela said, when you imagine something better about people and treat them with respect and dignity, often they act the better because of it. Not always—you don't get to choose that. But you get to choose your spirit.

So yes, we sit and meditate with breath and body and emotions, all the things that you've been practicing for some years, things you've learned in your life and in your years of retreats and meditation training. But what interests me is: What is your experience of freedom like? What moments have you learned where you thought, "Oh yes, I really have the choice, the possibility of living freely"—whether it's in your meditation or in your relationships or in the things that you tend in this world?

With this opening reflection, I'd like to ask those of you who are experienced practitioners to answer the question: Can you describe moments of freedom, of awakening, of that understanding that came to you? And what's that like?

"Wow, I get to start answering this question. Very nice. So my practice has led to the saying: 'This is all there is, and this is a miracle, and I'm a miracle connected to all these miracles.' I really deeply connect to that by feeling the life force in my system and being very present with this miracle that's unfolding in front of me right now."

Thank you. I'm very grateful to you. Beautiful. Can you think about a time when that was particularly clear to you or helpful, when you were in the middle of something?

"Well, that's my daily practice. I regularly come back to that. I thought you were going to ask about a time when it was very difficult to practice. I try real hard—like if I'm sick—to find that connection still to something inside of me that can bring forward a connection to the life force."

Lovely. So there you are sick and you say, "Yeah, but that's not the whole story. There's some life force or something greater than that." There's also a beautiful move that one can make, which is to realize that you're not the only one that's sick. As you're sick, there are lots of other people in the world who are being tended and cared for by so many others. And this is also part, as you say, of—what was your phrase?

This is life. This is a miracle too—health and sickness both. Just being alive.

Thank you, thank you.

Somebody else—moments of freedom, what you've discovered.

"First, I want to thank you for everything that you've shared, not just here today, but all over everything. I'm deeply, deeply grateful for everything that you've done and shared. I had a really interesting moment at the beginning of this most recent meditation. All the books that you wrote are at home, so all I had was a paperback Tara Brach with me. I was waiting in line to have you sign it because I saw you do that for someone else. And when it came to be my turn, you turned away. You may not have seen me, or

maybe it was time to start—whatever the reason. And I immediately went to this place where I was telling myself the story: *Oh, look, you're invisible now. You don't matter. You're subhuman. You're not worthy. You were born lower caste.* So I sat down and I really felt that sense of being despicable. And then I sat with it, and I realized that this is a story I tell myself sometimes. And the freedom for me came with the realization that I was able to recognize this as a story—that I was able to understand I could sit with it and just be with it and not have to fix it or change it or run away. And that was beautiful."

Thank you. Thank you for all of that. Sorry I didn't see you. But you know what? I see you now. And it's really a pleasure.

Thank you. That's great.

"Hi. I had a moment yesterday that took me through the whole gamut of emotions. I have an elderly mother and father, and they live quite far away. We had a little health scare yesterday. My father sounded panicked. He said Mom wouldn't come out of bed. I started having all these stories of her demise, all kinds of terrible things that could be happening—how powerless I was, how I wasn't going to get there, and even if I got there, I wouldn't be useful because I've been so far away. And then I felt shame and terrible and sad, all these things. I sat with that for most of the day.

Finally I called my mom at, I guess, four-thirty her time, and she'd finally gotten out of bed. She was very cheerful. She said, 'Oh, hello! How are you?' I said, 'Oh, I'm really, really good.' We're planning to go to this wedding in two weeks. And she goes, 'Are you going to the wedding?' I've told her like a hundred and fifty times that I'm going to the wedding. 'Yes, yes, Mom, I'm going to the wedding.' 'And your children, are they going to the wedding?' 'Yes, Mom, they're going to the wedding.' 'Oh, that's so great!' She goes, 'I'm sorry, I forget.' And I said, 'You know what's wonderful, Mom? I am so envious of you. You get to be delighted over and over again with the same news. And I'm just happy to tell it to you, because every time, you get to have the same amount of delight.'"

And then I thought, she's the Buddha.

Anyway, that was my story. Thank you.

Thank you. Yeah, so much in that. All the ways in these last two stories that we tell ourselves stories about things as if they're real, and they're just thoughts. And to be able to step out of that as you describe—oh yeah, that was an interesting story, wasn't it? Beautiful.

Next, please.

Sure. Over the years, I've struggled with becoming really agitated and aggravated in the workplace with my coworkers. Sometimes it's gossiping, saying mean-hearted things, saying harsh, negative, critical things. In the past, I used to say something that would qualify as gossip, mean-spirited, and afterwards I would kind of have a rush of pride. But then I would feel ugly.

More recently, that's really changed. Now, before I say something, I have that sensation. And for me, that's given me a lot of freedom.

Beautiful. Yeah. I mean, there's a way in which we do talk about one another and there's something meaningful in it. But to be able to sense your best intention, to sense what you're doing and ask yourself, "Is this healthy? Is this helpful or not?" That freedom you just described. Wonderful. Thank you.

Next.

Hi there. I've had a mindfulness practice for several years, thanks to Spirit Rock. And I'm very grateful to you, so thank you. It's been particularly—and very, I should say extremely—helpful to me as a mother of three. Something you shared that I want to share with the rest of you who are parents, something you shared with me that I use from time to time. There are several antidotes that I use as a parent. In moments of chaos with my kids, I say to them, "This is a moment of suffering, and this too shall pass." And it diffuses whatever chaos is happening, and they look at me like I'm crazy. But it really helps. There are many things that you've shared with me over the years. I just thank you, Jack. Thank you.

How old are your kids now?

Now they're fifteen, eleven, and nine.

Good luck. Teenagers are supposed to be a little bit chaotic—that's their job, you know. They're trying to learn all these things, and their brains are just sort of opening to enormous creativity and vision and things like that. We kind of want to organize them, and they're saying, "No, no, look at what's possible!" Some of it's messy, but it's also natural. Great.

Please, who's next?

So before I thought about the question, "What gives me moments of freedom?" I first started thinking, "What are the moments where I feel like a prisoner? What are the things that take me away from my freedom?" And I believe fear is the major one that gets to me.

So I believe the moments of freedom come when I have faith that there is something more powerful than myself, and I'm not running the show. Whenever I'm meditating, instead of sometimes saying "not now," I put it in someone else's hands, not mine—in my higher power's hands. And if the fear comes twenty times, I twenty times just put it in someone else's hands. Exactly. Until all of a sudden it quiets down, and that's when I have the freedom—knowing that I'm here just learning, someone is running the show, and I'm just doing my best. When I feel that I'm in control, that I'm in charge, fear is with me.

But when I let go of that control is when I feel the freedom.

Thank you. Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Hi, I'm really happy to be here. First of all, Jack, I've been listening to your recordings on Dharma Seed for a while and I practice with some of your students, so it's just really wonderful to be here.

Thank you.

I don't know about anybody else, but I find that intimate partnership is a space of great beauty and great challenge.

Even the Buddha and Jesus had trouble when they went home to their families, right? So you've got to understand that this closeness brings certain challenges, yes.

Well, and even despite knowing that, being a practitioner for a few years now, I've put immense pressure on myself in my practice. Like you said earlier, it's called practice, it's not called perfect. But I can understand that intellectually, and then still that's kind of the go-to.

I've found that when I'm in really tense moments with my partner, my go-to is—like one of my teachers said—I'm like a warrior. I've got weapons hidden everywhere. In a sleeve I've got a knife, then I've got a gun. I'm really sharp with my words, so when I'm in an unconscious place, they can really hurt somebody. And afterwards, historically, I've felt really painful after I've said things and been hard on myself.

But I had a moment recently where my partner and I were in a very tense argument situation, and I just had this moment where I felt the knife ready to come out. I was quiet for a second and I just breathed and said, "You know what, I'm feeling a lot of anger in my body right now, and I want to say something but I don't want to say it, so I'm just going to take a second and breathe." Right after I said that, my thought was, "Wow, good job." That was such a moment of freedom—instead of the inner dictator or the inner scoundrel, as Matt Kahn calls it, there was this loving presence. That felt like the fruition of everything. That was worth everything, basically.

Thank you. Beautiful.

Thank you so much. I've really enjoyed coming here. It's only taken me twelve years to get here—I was in Berkeley with the Zen Center for a long time.

I'm sort of riding on the coattails of the other mom, and something I've found that has been very liberating with my teenage daughters has been when they expect me to do something that I kind of can't believe they're asking me to do, or can't believe they're upset about something after I've done so much. I just say, "Oh my queen, all I want to do is please thee." And it diffuses the situation. They're like, "Oh, really, Mom?" and they don't know what to say. Because it is true in one sense, rather than "I can't believe you're asking me to do that" or "I can't believe you're unhappy with this." I just say, "I'm here to please you." And it seems to diffuse the situation.

Great. Thank you.

A couple more.

"Some of the pieces that have really helped me over the past maybe two years since I really started my practice—one was initially the mind-like-sky meditation, being able to realize that I didn't have to be a prisoner to the thoughts that would stream in and stream out. That just opened a space for me to start going deeper in meditation.

One of the other pieces that's helped me is in my daily devotional—just the reminders of how much joy is important to bring into your life in the midst of darkness. The example it gave was that fire is a reminder of how much it can bring pain, and joy is also a good reminder that this is what is meant to be in your life.

These pieces have been really helpful for me as I've gone through a dark valley in the last year and a half—custody struggles, not being able to see my children. And through some guidance from you, being able to have compassion and forgiveness to-

ward an ex-partner where there was anger, lots of anger, that was blinding me. Joy was not even present in my life. Being able to get to the point of having compassion and realizing there's a story going on, probably for generations on that side—to open my heart and forgive allowed me the space to bring other parts of joy into my life. That's been through music and song. So I'm really thankful."

Thank you. So difficult, and yet you've learned so much in it.

One more.

"Thank you so much again. Thank you, Sangha, all these beautiful beings. I have a sense that what we all aspire to is less glimpses of freedom and more abiding liberation. And I've noticed that through loving-kindness practice and my practice of ahimsa as extreme sport—"

Can you say that again?

"Ahimsa as extreme sport."

Beautiful. It almost appears that way in our current world—even to take a vow of non-harming puts you a little bit out of the mainstream, we'll say.

"But through these practices, particularly loving-kindness, often poetically referred to as 'the kiss from within,' there reaches a point where discriminatory mind itself loses its hold and relaxes its grip. There's a sort of Laughing Buddha element to this. I think it was Papaji—someone said, 'What about liberation? How do we get liberation?' And he said, 'Who told you you were bound?' So excavating the story of what we believe has made us feel unfree—interestingly enough, the experience of being able to just drop discriminatory mindset, to not believe that my purpose or any of our purposes here is to continuously evaluate creation, each other, our fellow beings, in terms of 'this is good, this is bad, I like this, I don't like that'—was incredibly liberating."

So it's not your job to continuously evaluate and judge, huh?

"It's rather exhausting, quite frankly. Although I hear you have to become exhausted by samsara."

Beautiful, beautiful again. And I love hearing these because some of them are so practical—"Good job" to yourself, "I did that, I was able to not get so caught in that." Or "Oh, my queen," you know—just being playful about it and not getting so identified.

And some of them carry such depth. "I'm going through a custody battle. I can't even see my children. How do I do this? Do I let myself get sick? Do I carry that anger and fear? Or is there some way I can still have my own life?" Or whether it's with work, or with my mom who's lost her memory—but then she gets to have the delight over and over and over again. So that's a whole other way to hold it.

This capacity to be free lives within us. And as we begin in our meditation to learn to be present for the whole zoo that Carl Sandburg described, for the whole of our humanity, that sense of freedom grows. You become the loving awareness itself, and you then have the ability to be with difficult things and joyful things alike—to both enjoy what's beautiful, to water those seeds, and not be captured by that which otherwise would habitually take you and cause tremendous suffering.

There is a book some of you may know called *The Book of Joy*, written as a week-long dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, both of whom have amazing laughs. The Dalai Lama has a sort of deeper laugh, and Tutu giggles a lot. They're old buddies, both in their eighties, teasing each other. The Dalai Lama was trying to take Tutu's hat off, and Tutu says, "What, you're a thief? We're supposed to be holy men. You're stealing things!" They're just delighting in each other.

The premise of the book is to explore how these two people, who have both been in the fire of so much suffering, can carry such joy. For Tutu, it was the years of apartheid when people around him were being burned and killed and shot. For the Dalai Lama, the loss of his country of Tibet—unable to go home for more than fifty years, temples burned, sacred texts destroyed, monks and nuns thrown into prison.

Someone once asked the Dalai Lama, "How can you be happy?" And he said, "They've taken so much from me. They've taken my freedom to walk my own land. They've burned our temples. They've tried to take our sacred places and texts away. Why should I let them take my happiness?"

That sense of freedom they each carry is truly remarkable. I think that's why people go to see the Dalai Lama. Yes, they go because of those great Tibetan teachings, half of which we don't understand. Or they go because he's the Nobel laureate, this amazing political figure. But I really think people go to hear him laugh. Someone who can carry the weight that he does and still have such a joyful heart and a beautiful smile says, as so many of these stories we've just heard from people say, that your spirit is given to you. It is free. And that is really the great choice. From that freedom, then you can do all kinds of things in the world.

CHAPTER 66

Dāna Talk

Jack Kornfield · 7 min

> *In this heartfelt reflection on generosity, Jack Kornfield draws from his years as a forest monk in Thailand to illuminate the deep significance of dāna in Buddhist practice. He recounts the moving experience of walking barefoot on alms rounds through impoverished villages on the Laos-Thailand border, where villagers with very little would offer food with profound reverence—not for the individual monks, but for what the Saṅgha represented: the precious teachings of Dhamma, virtue, wisdom, and compassion that formed the heart of their culture.*
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> *Kornfield reflects on the weight of receiving such offerings in silence, understanding that the only appropriate response was genuine dedication to practice. He connects this traditional Asian devotional quality to Western practice centers like IMS, noting how the same spirit of generosity has allowed the Dhamma to flourish for 2,600 years and continues to sustain teachers and students today.*
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> *Beyond supporting temples and teachers, Kornfield expands the teaching to encompass living with a generous spirit as an essential aspect of awakening. He suggests adding forgiveness, gratitude, and generosity to the traditional brahmavihāras of mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā—recognizing these qualities as what make the heart truly joyful. This talk serves as an invitation to feel generosity not as an obligation but as a beautiful expression of practice that connects us to an unbroken lineage of giving.*

Now being around two o'clock, the schedule asked that everyone come for closing announcements. It's a bit of a mistake, my fault really—I should have checked the schedule more carefully because it would seem better to have done this at the end of the afternoon. But it had already been arranged, and then I thought, well, coming and going. A weekend is a weekend. We know we have to leave tomorrow anyway, so it's not like a surprise to you. Let this be very much part of our practice. We'll go back in again to continue silence and dialogue and so forth. This is just one of the events arising.

Also, maybe you can feel in the course of this retreat the change of form, where it's a bit more flexible in some ways and interactive. And even with Tija's beautiful songs last night, a little of that devotional quality. If you go to Buddhist Asia—back to Burma and Thailand and places like that—and maybe I mentioned this—it's very much a devotion-

al practice there for people. People go with such reverence to the temples, and generosity is enormous in those cultures. Later this afternoon, we'll talk some about the Pāramitās and Bodhisattva and that kind of expression into the world.

I remember one of the most moving experiences of being a forest monk, a monastic for the years that I was, would be to go out on alms round in the morning, sometimes with a few other monks, to walk barefoot five or ten miles to some village and come back with our bowls. The areas where I lived mostly were quite poor, on the border of Laos and Thailand. In the dry season, very poor—not a lot to eat. People would wait there in the morning for the monks to come through the village. We'd be silent, and then they would offer some of the food they'd made for the day. As I said, they had enough rice, but in the dry season there wasn't a lot else—a few vegetables, some of it like tree leaves chopped up with chili peppers and old broken fish sauce with a lot of pepper so that it would last for months.

They would place the food in the bowl with so much reverence, even though they didn't have much. And I think, okay, I grew up in the U.S., and even though my family didn't have a lot of money, if I was in trouble I could wire home and my mom would send me five hundred or a thousand dollars to get me out of trouble. That's more than the average annual wage of a lot of the people in these villages—double, triple it. What was I doing taking their food?

But they saw us as carrying something that was so important for their culture. There was so much reverence—not just for the particular monks, but for what we stood for in the temple. They so valued that the culture had the teachings of Dharma, of virtue and generosity and wisdom and understanding and compassion. The monastics really represented that which they loved about their culture, among one of the most precious things. And so they were saying, here, we'll give of the little that we have.

You can't say thank you—you can't say, "Wow, I got a mango, fantastic, thank you!" You do it all in silence. All I could do is receive it and say, all right, I have to practice now. I have to take their generosity, which is so enormous.

You feel it if you go now to the great temples too. You go to the Shwedagon in the center of Rangoon and people stream in. Yes, there are offerings, but more than that, there's just so much love and compassion and devotion to Dharma that's woven into the cultures.

So IMS has become that place for a lot of people, for our lives—many of us as old students who come back here. And it's through the generosity of the whole community of people that it has blossomed in the way it has, together with the Forest Refuge and the Study Center. It's in beautiful shape.

Often we wait to the end of retreats and do the dāna talk—please help support the teachers and things—which is a lovely thing. But it doesn't at all communicate the magnificence of the generosity that's kept the Dharma going for 2,600 years, and how you feel it both in those home cultures and, in some way, here in the food and the walls and all the new things that have been done here.

Your support for us as teachers makes it possible for us to teach. It's really fantastic, and then we can teach other people. So it's really meaningful and very beautiful and accepted with a great deal of gratitude.

These things—whether it's generosity, not just supporting the temple but living a life of a generous spirit, not so self-centered, living a life that has gratitude in it—these are what make our heart joyful, along with the Brahmavihāras of mettā, karuṇā, compassion, joy, and equanimity. I would add the Brahmavihāras of forgiveness, of gratitude, and of generosity in some way. These are the awakened heart.

So this is the pre-dāna, dāna talk. But it's also an invitation to feel all this as part of our practice in some really beautiful way.

So with that, I turn it over to Daphne and Roberta to add things about IMS and everything else.

CHAPTER 67

The Buddha's Last Teachings | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 1h00

> *In this profound exploration of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Jack Kornfield presents the Buddha's final year not as dry history but as transformative myth—a story that speaks from an ancient heart to our own. Beginning with "thus I have heard" and ending with "this is how it was in the old days," these teachings address how we create wise communities, how we face our own mortality, and how we discover the awakened nature within ourselves.*
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> *Kornfield weaves through the sutta's essential episodes: the Buddha's counsel on what makes societies prosper (harmony, caring for the vulnerable, tending the environment), Sāriputta's teaching on mindfulness as the gateway to liberation, the recurring visits of Māra reminding us that enlightenment is not a final destination but an ongoing dance, and the Buddha's radical inclusivity shown through his acceptance of the courtesan Ambapālī. The teaching emphasizes that liberation is available to all—"not by caste or creed, not by race or birth does one become noble, but by the state of one's heart."*
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> *The talk culminates in the Buddha's final instructions: be a lamp unto yourself, let the Dhamma be your guide, and remember that all created things are impermanent. Kornfield illuminates how every place can be sacred, how the teacher-student relationship requires mutual responsibility, and how the golden robes symbolize that which never tarnishes—our own true nature as loving awareness. This teaching invites us to ask: what part of this ancient story touches our own lives most deeply?*

So this evening I want to give a talk following one of the great Buddhist texts, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, which is a teaching on the last year of the Buddha's life.

When you look at the Buddhist texts, they're full of stories—encounters with people who come to see the Buddha seeking understanding or relief from suffering or healing, philosophers and yogis trying to understand the mind. He meets them all and gives each one an individual instruction: sometimes mindfulness training, sometimes compassion, sometimes wisdom, sometimes the training in virtue and ethics, sometimes the training in how to tend one's body and heart.

This particular text is one of my favorite teachings. I've returned to it every three or four years for quite a while because I find it inspiring. These teachings are meant to be examined as a kind of experiment for yourself, reflecting on how they affect you or point to something important in your own life.

I want to speak of these teachings not as history—because while it's a historical account of his last year, that approach can feel dry, like recounting what I did last summer. Instead, I want to present it as myth, as part of one of the greatest myths of humankind: the myth of the Buddha leaving the princely life and becoming an ascetic, sitting under the tree of enlightenment, discovering awakening, teaching people, returning to his own family, and traveling on foot throughout India for forty-five years. The myth of the Buddha is a story of what's possible for us.

The reason I want to teach it in mythological terms is that you'll hear it sounds that way. It begins with the phrase "Thus I have heard," which is a little bit like "once upon a time." And it ends with "This is how it was in the old days." So you can settle back and listen to this story that speaks from an ancient heart, timeless, to your own.

This teaching has two main themes. One is how the Buddha wants to leave his teachings as guidance to practice, to empower the community and people who are following him. The second is to foster wiser relationships to one another in the spiritual community and to the world.

The setting for this teaching is Vulture's Peak—already a kind of mythological word—a mountain in northern India that rises from the plains near the modern province of Bihar. In those days, the region was covered with great forests and huge trees and wild animals. Now it has become deforested, more desert land with poorer soils. But then it was verdant and fecund and filled with life. That's where the monks and nuns and followers of the Buddha heard these teachings along the plain of the Ganges.

The text offers empowerment by setting up the image of a kingdom of justice and compassion and respect. How should we continue to practice when you, the Buddha, have gone? He's preparing people for the end of his life.

It begins with a dialogue where the minister from the King of Magadha, one of the local kingdoms, comes to see the Buddha and asks, "Should we make war on the Vajjians? There is a possibility of conflict building up. Should we engage in war? Should we back off? What should we do?"

Instead of giving advice about whether they should engage in war, the Buddha in his usual way invites them to inquire deeply. He says, "Tell me, do the Vajjians meet together in harmony, listen to one another respectfully, and depart in harmony?"

The minister says, "Yes, they do."

The Buddha replies, "Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians protect those who are vulnerable among them—the children, the women, the elderly, the sick?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians stay true to the ancient teachings of living with virtue and understanding and cultivating the heart?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians take care of the nature shrines and of the environment in which they live as a sacred place?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline."

The minister left and returned to his king, saying, "The Buddha said these Vajjians are doing all the things that make them strong and help them prosper and make a beautiful society." Listening to each other in harmony—I wish we were doing that more in our current time—respecting the vulnerable, taking care of the natural environment, following the deep teachings of wisdom.

Then the Buddha turns to his own community. "So to you monks, so to you nuns, so to you lay followers: you should follow in their footsteps. You should cultivate listening to each other with respect and harmony, taking care of the vulnerable among you, sustaining the natural world around you, preserving your own personal mindfulness. Thus you too will prosper and not decline. As long as the monks and nuns, both in public and in private, show loving-kindness to their companions through acts of body, speech, and thought, and share their virtuous actions with one another, so long will they prosper and not decline. For this is the basis for the freedom of heart, for liberation."

This is how the teaching begins—by setting up what a wise kingdom looks like, both among the Vajjians and for us at this time. What would a wise society look like? To listen deeply, to care for the vulnerable and the environment.

But here's my question for you: if we take this as a myth and not just history, why didn't the Buddha say, "You shouldn't go to war against the Vajjians—they might defeat you, they cannot be defeated"? Reflect for a moment: why didn't he do that?

One of the things that's important to hear in this is that instead of saying "do this" or "do that," the Buddha is pointing to the underlying causes, not just the effects of things —to see that if we live in a certain way, what will be the outcome? He wants those who are listening to him, those who are seeking wisdom, to inquire in themselves: What is it that makes a wise society? What gives strength and courage? To see the causes rather than receive a simple answer.

The rest of this long text of many pages, this sutra, is the gist of his travels, the announcement of his death, the last disciples, the last teachings, what he wants people to keep in mind and follow, his last meal, and what happens at his death.

Here are some of the stories.

At this point, the Buddha wanders with a company of renunciates and lay followers from Vulture's Peak to Pavarika's mango grove near Nalanda. There, as he sits quietly, his chief disciple, the wisest of them, Sariputra, comes up to him and looks at him with great admiration. "There will never be a better, never be a more enlightened teacher than you, oh master," he says, speaking to the Buddha.

The Buddha raises his eyebrows and looks back at Sariputra, wise though he's supposed to be. "Do you know the other Buddhas from the other eras?"

"No," says Sariputra.

"Do you know the ones from the past?"

"No."

"Do you know the ones in the future?"

"No."

"Do you know the extent of the Buddha's mind sitting in front of you?"

"No, sir."

"Then how can you say such a thing?"

Sariputra responds to the Blessed One: "Just as if there were a great city surrounded by a mighty wall, and there was one entrance gate into the city. At the entrance gate stood someone who was watchful and caring, compassionate and strong, courageous, who noticed what wanted to come into the city or who was leaving, and could discern: this is for the benefit of those living in this place, and this is not for the benefit. In the same way," said Sariputra, "the awakened ones of all the eras and all the times rest at

the gateway of mindfulness and notice as thoughts come and go, as experiences rise and pass, as people and interactions happen. They quiet themselves and, as if standing at the gate, they receive all of this with discernment and loving awareness, with mindfulness. In so doing, they allow that which is healthy into themselves, and that which is not, they do not."

Rumi writes this poem: "What use is it to make such a fuss when we will soon enough all go through that same gate?" And of course, he's speaking of the gate at the end of life.

But this is a beautiful teaching. Here, Sariputra answers: all right, I don't know the Buddhas of the past and present, but I know the nature of liberation itself. When we rest in the present and can notice what arises, with discernment seeing this is healthy and this is unhealthy, and with that discernment follow—that is the gateway to our freedom and to our liberation.

As they wander further along the banks of the Ganges River, the Buddha and those following take a seat at some point. The Buddha says, "Tell me, those of you who are practicing to cross the flood of sorrow—when you get to the other side, what will you do with the raft of your teachings?" He explains: "These teachings are a raft to cross over, to make a bridge, to help you across the flood of confusion and difficulty. By establishing mindfulness, by establishing concentration and stillness and steadiness, by establishing integrity—these become your raft. But when you cross the flooded Ganges, then what do you do with the raft? Do you carry it around with you?"

Of course, the disciples, being wise, say, "No, we don't, sir. No, we don't."

And the Buddha says, "Just so. These are teachings to use. These are teachings to guide you, but they're not teachings to carry. They're simply used to cross over the moments and days of confusion or fear, to have these teachings to cross over into the peace of liberation, which you can do in a moment. And then you leave the teachings aside."

As the story goes along, the Blessed One continued and sat to rest under a great tree in the forest, asking to be alone to meditate. As he did, Mara came—who in this language, in that time, is the incarnation of ignorance, greed, and hatred, sometimes translated as "the evil one," although I don't think evil is quite the right language for Mara. Certainly the opposite of enlightenment.

As you all know, in the great story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree, Mara came and tried to tempt him with his beautiful daughters and every possible desire. The Buddha just sat there and said, "I see you, Mara." Then Mara threw flaming arrows and spears at the Buddha, and he touched them with his fingers and heart of com-

passion, and they turned to flower petals at his feet. Then Mara tried doubts: "Who do you think you are to sit in this way? You don't even know what's possible." And then the goddess of the earth rose up and swept away Mara, saying, "This human being has sat and established the basis of liberation in his own heart for so long. He does understand it."

Well, it turns out Mara keeps coming back. You may have noticed this in your own life. You go to retreat, you do your own meditation, things seem hunky-dory, everything's fine, you're in a great place—and then who comes knocking? Mara re-appears.

And the thing is, if you read in these texts, Mara comes back forty times during the Buddha's life. When he has a backache, or when things are difficult in his community, or during various struggles, Mara appears. This is because, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, no Mara, no Buddha. The Buddha and Mara actually inter-are. Without Mara, the Buddha wouldn't have something to awaken from.

We all carry this within ourselves. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer and peace activist, said: "If only there were evil people out there insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were simply necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our own heart?"

So Mara will appear for you, as he does for the Buddha, over and over in this story. And each time Mara appears, the Buddha says, "Is that you, Mara?"

In this case, Mara says, "I've come to see you many times and said it's time for you to quit your teaching. You should retire. You should end your life. You've done what you wanted. And you always said, 'I need to have a great community of people. I need to benefit people and have them benefit one another. Only then can I take final nirvana.'" And Mara said, "Now you've done this. It's time for you to let go."

The Buddha reflects and says, "Yes, Mara. Later this year, I will take my final nirvana."

Now, why does Mara keep coming? You'd think there's happily ever after enlightenment, wouldn't you? But it's not like that. The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Mara is part of the myth and part of the human incarnation of our dance.

Mara has been visiting you, and every time you meditate, you might get quiet for a little bit and then Mara comes. It doesn't matter if you're in Des Moines or Florida or Belfast, Ireland—Mara will find you. And then you can say, "Oh yes, doubt, fear, confusion. Is that you, Mara?" The minute you can acknowledge it and say, "Oh Mara, I know you," then Mara loses his power.

So as soon as the Buddha said to Mara, "Yes, finally I will end my dispensation, I will end my teaching—this year I will pass into final nirvana," there was a great earthquake, a terrible hair-raising earthquake and thunder. Ananda, his attendant, came running and said, "What is the cause of this great earthquake?"

The Buddha explained there are great earthquakes because of the movement of the earth, but there are also earthquakes when a Buddha is conceived, when he's born or she's born, when he's enlightened, when he first turns the wheel of the Dharma, and when he renounces his teaching.

But why the image of an earthquake? Because it's the shaking of the foundation of all the ground we stand on. The enlightenment, the teachings of birth and death—the earthquake says this is what awakens us from the dream of separateness and solidity. There's something greater here in our human incarnation. Who are you really? Remember, you are consciousness itself born into this body. You're the witness to it all. And the earthquake reminds you of this.

Then Ananda weeps and begs, "Please stay! Many times you've told me that you could live a long, long time. Please don't die."

The Buddha replies, "I gave you hints that I could stay a long time, but you never asked me until this moment. I gave you hints that if you told me three times I must stay for a long time, I could do so. These hints I told you at the Black Snake Pool and at Jivika's mango grove and at the deer park in Rajgir and the cool wood in Tipota. Each time you could have said, 'Please stay and live long and long,' but you did not. So yours is the fault, Ananda."

How about your teacher saying that at the end of his life or her life? "Yours is the fault." Talk about a serious guilt trip. "Yours is the failure for not asking, Ananda."

And then he went on: "Now my body is old, like an old cart held together by straps and thongs, and you have not asked me to stay."

So this year I will take my final Nirvana.

How can we understand this? Why would the Buddha say this to his most beloved attendant, his cousin, the person that everybody respected? He says, "It's your fault, Ananda." Reflect for a moment. What could this mean?

Yes, his body is like an old cart, and that's what happens to our bodies. But there's something deeper in this. He's trying to say that the teacher-student relationship is not one way—that everyone you relate to, those who are your teachers, and everyone becomes your teacher in some way, but especially where you receive important teachings—is a two-way responsibility. You have to listen and tend and be caring as they do. It is an interdependent relationship. And thus it is your responsibility to be in that relationship and offer yourself, as that other person—the wise one, the teacher, the person you're learning from—does too.

Now it's also true that later, just before the Buddha dies, he praises Ananda as he'd done often in these texts—for his care and beauty, how pleasant he is for everyone who's come to see the Buddha, how he tends them well, the qualities of his timing and sensitivity. He loves Ananda, and it's a very clear relationship. But this is a moment where he's saying, "This is a two-way deal, Ananda, and you and I have to take care of each other." If you want to awaken, this is what you too need to remember.

Then it goes along in another scene. The Buddha and the gathering of renunciates and lay followers leave and travel along the Ganges River, and he offers teachings to the large company of followers. Each time he completes these teachings, when he's done, he sits quietly. Those who receive these teachings hear the last phrase he offers: "Now is time for you to go and do as you see fit."

Why would he say this? Each time someone comes with questions, he gives a response. Somebody asks for a teaching on mindfulness, compassion, forgiveness—he gives the teachings. And then he says, "Now it is time for you to go and do as you see fit."

What does this mean? What it points to is that the teacher cannot do it for you. No one can get enlightened for you. No one can love for you. No one can forgive for you. No one can awaken for you. No one can let go for you. So the Buddha offers his pointings, his teachings, his skillful means, his medicine. And then he says, "It's in your good hands. Now it is time for you to do as you see fit."

There's a beautiful empowerment in this that we can take into our lives, into all of our interactions with those we care about—because often it is the people you really care about. "It's now in your good hands." And that allows you to be peaceful and steady and caring, but not attached or grasping to the outcome.

Then Ananda and the senior monks and nuns ask the Buddha, "So once you are gone, who will be our guide?" A great question, when you don't have the great teacher with you.

The Buddha put no one in charge of the Sangha. He didn't say, "All right, now I deputize Sariputta or Ananda"—whoever it might be—"They will be the next Buddha to take over the community." He said, "The truth will be your guide. Be an island unto yourself. Let the Dharma teachings and the teachings of ethics and virtue—let them be your guide."

And they said, "How shall these be our guide? How can we know?" They responded, "What are the real teachings of the Buddha?"

He said there are four ways to know, because he liked to make lists. You heard it from the lips of the Blessed One. You heard it from the circle of elders. You learned it as respected teachings some masters had repeated. Should you follow these? Should you approve or not approve?

He said only—only if you consider in your own heart. Does this conform to the gist of the Dharma teachings that you have heard? Does it have a basis in virtue and ethics, not harming oneself and others? Then it is the path of liberation.

Does it have a basis in samādhi and quieting the mind, in looking deeply and listening? Then it is a path to liberation. Does it have a basis in wisdom, in seeing clearly? Then it is the teaching of the Blessed One. Does it follow the Four Noble Truths—that there is suffering, that it acknowledges suffering, that it sees the causes of greed, hatred, and ignorance, that it offers the path of mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom to the end of suffering? If it does, then it is the teachings of the Blessed One.

And he went from place to place offering these fundamental teachings: the Four Noble Truths, the foundations of mindfulness, of loving awareness of the body, of feelings, of the play of the mind, and of our relations with one another. Establishing ourselves in mindful loving awareness, we begin to partake in the consciousness, in the mind, in the heart of liberation. We share that with the Blessed One.

Now the Buddha continues to wander. This is again an account of that whole last year. He comes to rest and practice in a large and beautiful forest grove. The texts describe the travel becoming difficult for him. His body is getting sicker now. Yet his heart is at peace.

In this forest grove, he becomes surrounded by followers—the word goes out that this may be the Buddha's last year of teaching. Five hundred or a thousand, they use these numbers, sometimes a thousand or ten thousand, renunciates and monastics and devoted lay people come. And there they are in the forest. Visiting dignitaries and yogis and people who hear about the Buddha arrive for teachings.

Here you see the Buddha in this part of the story, seated in the midst of this great following. In the distance, a retinue of the finest carriages arrives. The courtesan Ambapālī comes dressed in her finest silks with a whole coterie of young and beautiful women and their attendants, all in their finest silks and perfumes. They seat themselves near the Blessed One and bow and pay their respects, walking into the grove step by step with gestures of reverence.

When they do, it says the Buddha instructed and inspired and roused and awakened them. He taught them the four foundations of mindfulness, the gateways of liberation. He taught them about the dignity of virtue and living with integrity. As they sat to the side of the Buddha and listened deeply, there awakened in them a sense of freedom—the shift of identity from confusion and misunderstanding to realize that they could step back and be the loving witness of it all, not caught in their reactivity, not caught in separateness. And great delight arose in them.

Then Ambapālī, in response, invited the Buddha and a company of five hundred of his followers in a formal invitation to come and take a meal at her palace. The Buddha accepted.

And then an interesting thing happened. While they were still seated there, a whole new group of carriages came. You can tell how mythological this is—it's kind of wonderful. These were the nobles, the Licchavis of the local kingdom, of the great city nearby. They came and heard the last of the Buddha's teachings. He also roused them when they sat and paid their attention. They arrived dressed in blue and yellow and white, the text says, with great silks and adornment, royal carts and horses and elephants. It was their turn. Then they invited the Buddha to take a meal, which was the great way of making merit—saying, if we can offer something to you, you give us these amazing teachings, and now we want to have this relationship where we support you and your followers. They wished to make the deepest of all merit by caring for the Blessed One.

The Buddha said, "I'm sorry, I cannot accept your invitation. I've already received an invitation from the courtesan Ambapālī, who is sitting over there with her retinue."

They became quite upset. "You accepted the invitation from that mango woman?" This was a kind of slang, a slur for being a courtesan. The Buddha said, "I accepted her invitation."

They grew so upset that they went over to her and said, "We want to make an offering and a meal for the Blessed One while he is here." She shook her head. They said, "We will give you one hundred thousand gold pieces."

And Ambapālī, whose heart had just awakened in the presence of the Buddha, said, "Not for a whole kingdom would I give up the chance to make an offering to the Blessed One"—because that was the source of her own awakening.

They went back and asked the Buddha again. He said, "I have accepted. Dear friends, she was first."

So why does the courtesan appear here in the myth, in the story? Reflect for a moment. It is a really beautiful teaching about who can practice and who is worthy of liberation. What are the deepest values of the Dharma?

These values say that not by caste or creed, not by race or birth, said the Buddha, does one become noble. One becomes noble by the state of one's heart. A truly radical teaching in a society where the Brahmin and Hindu structure was all about caste—who is above whom, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and the different levels of the castes, the Shudras, the untouchables.

And he said, no, nobly born you, who have the great heart that is capable of awakening. Each of you, oh nobly born, remember who you really are.

And he turned no one away. He saw the nobility of every human being. And so Ambapali really stands in for all the rest of us—for those who are wounded, those who have been cast aside in the culture, those who are insecure, all the ways we think we're not worthy. And the Buddha says, yes, you are worthy. You, human being, you come, and if you come with your sincerity, the dharma gates will open for you and will bless you.

And then as the story goes on, the last meal is offered to the Buddha at Pava Mango Forest. As the meal is offered, the Buddha says, "This portion is for me. No one else eat." And Kunda offered the best hard and soft foods. But it turns out that this last meal—depending on what story you read of it—contained something that had gone bad in the food, in the part that the Buddha took. And he knew it. He was already sick a lot that year. And he took this meal anyway, for whatever reason, perhaps because he knew finally it was his time. And it was offered with so much sincerity.

He ate it, and shortly thereafter described having pains like a knife cutting into his abdomen. That's how sick the dysentery became, and the difficulty. But even as he started to feel sick, he looked at Kunda the Smith and he said, "Thank you for offering this last meal. It is one of the most important offerings that a Buddha receives in his life. And you will make great blessings from this."

Now, why would he say this? Here you're giving the meal and the Buddha dies not long after. Doesn't seem like a very good thing. But what happened when you reflect on this is that the Buddha pointed to the purity of Kunda the Smith's intention. The key to karma is your motivation. And this was offered with such a pure heart and so much goodness that the Buddha said, it is your pure heart and your goodness that in the end will bear fruit.

And you can feel this in your own life. Even though it doesn't bear fruit right away, when you act out of truth, out of your deepest values, out of what you care about the most, and there's a purity and integrity in it—it not only feels right to you, but it makes the karma, sows the seeds of liberation and wellbeing and flowering.

And then, after this, he is taken to a nearby forest glade and sits by a stream and closes his eyes and goes into a deep meditation. When he wakes up, a man named Pukkusa walks by, and the Buddha says, "I am thirsty." And Pukkusa says, "I will get you water from the river, but some carts have crossed this river while you were meditating. Did you not see them?" And the Buddha said, "I did not." The blessed one was in another place, which was the state of deep samadhi. He said, "Even if five hundred carts had passed, in that state, timeless and transcendent, I would not have heard them."

And this is the state that is never born and never dies. The Buddha was seated there in the timeless realm of awareness itself, consciousness that creates all things. And then he returned to the incarnation of being the blessed one, the Buddha Gautama.

And Pukkusa said, "I cannot get you water from the river. It's all stirred up." And the Buddha said, "Please bring me some." And he brought the water in a container, and the Buddha held it in his hand. And it all became clear and purified, like you would put alum into a glass or a container with mud and it would all settle to the bottom. And again, this is a beautiful image of the Buddha's own mind and heart saying, you can bring me that which is muddy, and when I hold it in loving awareness and in the awakened consciousness that we are, it all settles and becomes clear.

And then Pukkusa said, "Let me offer the blessed one some robes for this last part of your journey." And he gave him these robes of burnished gold cloth. As the Buddha put the robes on, the gold cloth faded into the background and his own skin began to glow golden, brighter than the robes themselves.

What is this? The Buddha glowing in gold, the gold robes. Why is this in the story? Gold is a symbol of that which does not tarnish. No matter what happens, gold will not tarnish.

It holds its royal beauty. And so these robes and the glow of the Buddha represented that which is untarnished by the arising and passing of all things.

And here, says Pakusa, the Blessed One who began to speak has roused and inspired us all, has set up that which has been knocked down, has pointed the way to one who is lost, who has carried a lamp into the dark places of the world so that those with eyes to see can see, and those with a heart to open can know that which is unborn, the timeless—the reality beyond our individual separateness, the freedom that we were born to. This is the Dharma body of the Buddha.

There was a very wonderful text at one point earlier. A man who was deeply devoted and inspired by the Buddha used to follow him around and gaze at him, because the Buddha was said to have been a handsome man with a handsome presence, a beacon of compassion and love and wisdom. This disciple would just stare at him.

After some weeks or months, some long time, the Buddha looked at this disciple and asked, "Why do you keep staring at me?"—knowing exactly the answer.

The man said, "Oh, I love to look at the Blessed One, to hear your words. I see you. You're so magnificent. You're so inspiring."

And the Buddha replied, "You do not see me. You only see this outer form, this body, these robes. That's not who I am."

The man paused and said, "Then how might I see you?"

The Buddha replied, "One who sees the depth of the Dharma—that is one who sees the Awakened One."

In any moment when you step out of the separate sense, the small sense of self, the separate body—sometimes called the body of fear—and feel first the interdependence with all that lives, and then beyond that recognize that consciousness is what you really are: timeless, unborn, awakened, free—then you see the Buddha, you know the Buddha.

After this, with Pakusa's golden robes, the Buddha could barely move, but he went along with great pains and severe bloody sickness. This is saying something about human nature. This is what happens in a human incarnation, in a human form. It is not something to be avoided by us. Birth, growing up, aging, sickness, death—part of the First Noble Truth. This is the nature of incarnation. It is not bad. It is simply the way things are. Trees, especially deciduous trees, have their leaves in the summer. Then fall comes and they drop their leaves and there is snow in the winter. Everything has its cycle. This is the nature of incarnate life.

And so here is the magnificent Blessed One, the Buddha, with great pains and severe bloody sickness. He laid down in the lion's pose on his right side—if you want to sleep like the Buddha, lie on your right side—between two sal trees. As he lay there, it says the trees immediately bloomed full of blossoms.

Then, for those who had the eyes to see, the great yogis who could look beyond this dimension to others, the atmosphere became filled with angels and devas: the devas of great purity and the radiant ones, the devas of great peace and the devas of magnificent beauty, the devas of boundless compassion. They all appeared surrounding the Buddha.

The Buddha said to those standing near him, "Move aside a little bit so that the angels and the unseen beings can also have their place to see the Blessed One."

Resting there quite sick, still with the trees blooming and Ananda tending him, Ananda said, "Do not die here. Do not die. Why don't you go from here into Kosala, or Banaras, Varanasi—to one of the great cities, to a palace where you can be honored, or the banks of the Ganges? Don't die in this miserable backwater"—in what the texts call a daub and wattle village, an old anthropological term for huts made of little staves of bamboo and mud. "Don't die here. Go to some magnificent place where we can celebrate your passing."

The Buddha paused and said, "Do not call this a miserable backwater." And here we are again in the myth of this story as we come toward the end. He said, "Once upon a time long ago, on this very spot an eon ago, there was a king named Mahasudassana who was a wheel-turning monarch, and his palace on this place was the center of a worldwide kingdom—prosperous, well populated, a kingdom of justice. The streets of Mahasudassana's kingdom were full of the sounds of elephants and carriages, of gongs and commerce, of cattle and cymbals and joy and prosperity. From here in every direction stretched great roads north and south and east and west. And so I will die in this place that has been the center of Mahasudassana's kingdom."

Why is this in the story? Reflect for a moment.

What could this mean?

I love this because what it says is that any place and every place can be the center of justice, can be the same kingdom of righteousness. Every place is the still point of the turning world, the place where Dharma can be awakened. It may have been a muddy crossroad, a primitive and undeveloped area with simple huts. But the Buddha said, if you could see as I do, every place is sacred. And this is a holy place that in its time has been magnificent, but every place in its time is magnificent—even now, if you only have eyes to see.

And finally, one last visitor comes, and Ananda says, "No, no, no, the Blessed One is sick." But the Buddha lifts his head and says, "No, he may ask the last question. Let him in. The teachings of the Blessed One are open-handed to all."

The last visitor asked his question, and the Buddha points him to the noble path of wise understanding, wise thought, wise action, not harming, right livelihood, right speech, right action, and the development of mindfulness, compassion, wisdom. And then he looks to everyone around and says, "I have shown you the way. Does anyone have doubts?" And everyone is silent.

"I've taught you the way that leads to liberation, the way of virtue, of living with integrity and causing no harm to yourself and to other beings. I've taught you the way to quiet the mind and open the heart. I've taught you the great wisdom that releases you from the separate sense of self and opens you to timeless liberation—to what is called the sure heart's release."

As people listened quietly, he went on: "Then be of good resolve. All of you are nobly born. Remember who you really are—your own true nature." And he said, "If you practice wisely and rightly, the earth will never be free of enlightened beings." A beautiful teaching: if you practice wisely, this earth will never be free of awakened beings.

And finally he said, "Remember, all things that are created are impermanent. All that arises passes away. You must be a lamp unto yourself." Or as Mary Oliver says in her poem of the Buddha's last days: make of yourself a light, become the illumined one, become the awakened one yourself, and see with the eyes of freedom and wisdom.

In this passage from another poem of the Buddha:

I consider the position of kings and rulers as that of dust motes in a sunbeam. I see the treasures of gold and gems as broken tiles. I look upon the finest silken robes as tattered rags. I see the myriad worlds of the universe as small seeds, the great Indian ocean as drops of mud that soil one's feet. I perceive the teachings of the world to be the illusions of

magicians—all the worldly teachings are but illusions. I look upon the judgment of right and wrong as the serpentine dance of dragons, and the rise and fall of beliefs but traces left by the four seasons. I rest in the timeless and awakened heart that has seen them all. I rest in peace.

And with that, the Buddha—there is a whole description of him entering the deep states of samadhi and inner well-being beyond the sick body that he was in—was released from this life.

Make of yourself a light. All things change. All things are impermanent. This is the truth. This is the reality. And you have within you this capacity to awaken, this gift, your own true nature. Trust it, practice with it, awaken in it, live in it—the great heart of compassion, the freedom that is who you really are.

And this is the end of the story. Once upon a time, as it began—this great myth—and then it ends with these words: that's how it was in the old days, and how it still is with us now.

I kind of feel like I do when I'm putting my grandson Desmond to sleep. He's three and a half years old, and I've told him a long fairy tale. And he says, "Baba, tell me some more." And I tell a little more of the fairy tale. And then he's smiling and he starts to get ready to go to sleep.

This is a beautiful story that's been told for 2,600 years. And part of what makes these myths and stories so important is that they speak to a part of our own heart and understanding—that reminds us of something outside of the events of politics and confusion and all the things that are happening in the world, which we need to care for and tend to, just as this text started: to treat each other well, to listen and come together in harmony, to listen with respect and care for the vulnerable. We need to do all those things.

But then the Buddha says, here's a deeper invitation for you. Here's the mystery, because remember, it's not just the Buddha who's going to die, my dear friends. As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Me too. All of us.

So then in the end, what really matters? Yes, you tend, you love, you care. And you look deeply and see that you are the awakened one, that you are consciousness itself, you are loving awareness. And from this place of freedom and wellbeing and peace and compassion, you tend the world beautifully.

Oh, and by the way, Mara will visit you regularly. So as Thich Nhat Hanh said, you might as well invite him in for tea and say, "Oh, is that you, Mara, again?" "Oh my God, you see me! You know who I am." "Here's a little tea," says Thich Nhat Hanh. But he also says, let Mara have tea. Respect him. Say thank you for doing your job. But don't let him stay too long.

What part of this story caught your attention most? What place in the story do you feel like, "Oh yes, this reminded me, this was important, this touched me"? Because it is alive in you. And you can sense and know that.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 68

Seeing Anew

Jack Kornfield · 56 min

> *In this New Year reflection, Jack Kornfield invites us to cultivate beginner's mind—the capacity to see ourselves, others, and the world with fresh eyes. Drawing on Suzuki Roshi's teaching that the goal of meditation is to maintain beginner's mind, Kornfield explores how we can step out of habitual patterns of thought and the contracted sense of self to experience genuine renewal.*
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> *Through memorable stories—including the monastery transformed by treating each person as if they might be the Messiah, and a young girl with leukemia teaching her mother about choosing happy days—Kornfield illuminates the practical dimensions of inner freedom. He discusses the Buddha's encounter with Māra on the night of awakening, showing how we can recognize and befriend our own visitations of shame, fear, and doubt by becoming loving awareness that witnesses experience without being overwhelmed by it.*
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> *The talk weaves together essential practices for renewal: forgiveness as a path beyond resentment and guilt, the art of letting go that Ajahn Chah taught, and the courage to love anyway despite life's inevitable difficulties. Kornfield emphasizes that meditation reveals we are not our changing thoughts and emotions, but rather the timeless awareness witnessing them. This shift in identity—from being caught in experience to resting as the one who knows—opens access to profound trust, compassion, and the freedom to bring blessings wherever we go.*

Let yourself settle and sit in a way that is comfortable to listen. You don't have to remember any of this. There's no quiz at the end. Rather, listen in a way that if something reminds you of a truth or what's important to your own heart, let that resonate in you—and the rest of it you can just let pass by.

First, again, Happy New Year to you. I'd like to talk tonight about renewal, about seeing with a renewed heart, seeing things in a fresh way.

I got a call some years ago from the editor of one of the women's magazines that you see on newsstands. I think it was Cosmo, but I'm not sure. She asked if I could write a little piece on New Year's resolutions, in particular on lasting change—how to make change last. I said, "Wait a second, you've called a Buddhist. We believe in change, not the lasting part. I'm sorry, you've dialed the wrong number."

When Zen Master Suzuki Roshi first came to San Francisco and began to teach, he famously talked about beginner's mind. Those of us who were interested in Buddhism back in those days—I think *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* came out maybe in 1969 or 1970—we were captivated by this teaching. I remember talking to my colleague and dear friend Sharon Salzberg. She was already practicing and meditating, training in a very wonderful way in India. Someone gave her the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* and she looked at it and said, "Oh, this is for beginners," and sort of tossed it aside. She didn't realize until sometime later when she read it that beautiful statement where Suzuki Roshi says the goal of meditation, the end point, the culmination, the fruition of practice, is to keep a beginner's mind.

So we begin with beginner's mind, and then if we're lucky, we deepen it or return to it in some wonderful way. Or as Marcel Proust says in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the real voyage of discovery is seeing where you are with new eyes.

That's the possibility for us: to step out of the habitual patterns of thought and perception, to step out of what's called the small sense of self—the body of fear, it's sometimes called—and to begin to see things in a fresh and new way.

There's a story about an old monastery, a Christian monastery that had fallen on hard times. It was one of those orders that used to have monasteries all over, but gradually it began to die out as people became more modern and less interested in the contemplative life. This was the father house, the main place. The other ones had closed. All that was left were five or six old monks, and they were afraid that with their passing, their whole contemplative order would die out.

They were sitting around one day with the abbot, talking about what they could do. The abbot said, "You know, in the other part of the woods from where we are, there's a wise man, an old rabbi who lives there. Maybe I'll go over and ask for his advice."

So the abbot walked through the woods and paid his respects to the rabbi, whom he'd known for many years. They sat down and talked about how tough it was in the spiritual industry these days—how the world had become so much more materialistic, especially for contemplatives. Then the abbot asked, "Do you have any advice for us, to help us?"

The rabbi just wept. Some tears rolled down his cheeks. He said, "There's really nothing I can tell you, but I had this funny dream that the Messiah is there in your monastery. I don't know what it means, but I wish you well." And he sent him back.

So the abbot came back and they said, "What did the wise rabbi say?"

He said, "Well, we wept together. He had nothing really of value to say, except he had this funny dream that the Messiah was somehow in our monastery."

And they all began to ponder: What could this mean? They thought, could it mean the abbot? He's been their leader, and perhaps that's who it is. But on the other hand, it might have meant Brother Thomas, who was certainly a holy man, a man of light. It couldn't have meant Brother Elred—he gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's sides, when you look back, he's virtually always right. Maybe it's him. Maybe the rabbi meant he's the Messiah.

But surely not Brother Philip. He's so passive, a nobody. Of course, mysteriously, he does have a gift for somehow magically appearing by your side just when you need him. Maybe he's the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi couldn't have meant me.

He couldn't possibly mean me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet suppose he did. Suppose... suppose I am. Could I? Whatever.

And so they began to contemplate in this manner, and the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Now, the forest in which this monastery was situated was quite beautiful, and people occasionally came to visit and picnic on its little lawn and wander the paths. And as they did so in the year that followed, without being aware of it, they sensed this new aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and radiate out across the place. There was something strangely attractive about the way they were treating one another, something compelling. Hardly knowing why, people came back to play and picnic and show this place to others, to bring their friends. And then it happened that some of the younger men began to talk to the older monks, and after a while one asked if he could join, and then another. In a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order, thanks to the gift of the rabbi.

So what does it mean to see the people that you live with, or the trees surrounding your home or your apartment, or the community that you live in, afresh and anew? And what does it mean to see those that you live with and treat them with this kind of dignity and respect? And to treat yourself as well with that kind of dignity and respect?

One of the beautiful things in both the Buddhist teachings and in all these neuroscience studies that have been done in the last decades is that it turns out to be possible to step out of the blinders of our ordinary perception and see in a fresh way, to see anew. To step out of the fear and anxiety and prejudice and all of the things that blind us, and instead to see with eyes of understanding and with a beginner's mind.

There is a kind of shift of identity that begins to happen as you sit in meditation. Instead of being the thoughts and the worries and the plans and the tingles and itches and pain in your body and the various emotions of sad and happy and so forth, you become the witnessing of it. You become the loving awareness that says, "Oh yes, here are these thoughts, and here are these views and opinions, and here are the ways that I experience this body and mind." And when you look, you start to see that who you are isn't so rigid or fixed, that you can actually look anew at your very own mind and your very own life. And to live in a wise way, you really have to do that.

I've got a few passages from this new book that I'm just finishing on inner freedom.

Sarah, a single mom with two kids, found out that her eight-year-old daughter Alicia had a serious form of leukemia. She was terrified, anxious, grieving. For the first year, they went through long rounds of chemotherapy, hospital stays, doctors. A fearful sadness filled the house, and anxiety colored Sarah's days. And then one afternoon, out on a walk, Alicia said, "I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I want them to be happy days."

It was a splash of cold water on her mother's face. Sarah had to step out of the fearful melodrama and meet her daughter's freedom with her own, to return to a trusting spirit. Sarah grabbed her daughter and did a little waltz, holding her tight, and she felt herself let go. And in time, Alicia healed. She's now twenty-two, just graduated college. But even if she hadn't, what kind of days would you have her choose? You can't do that much with your life if you're miserable, after all. You might as well be happy.

So it's possible to renew and to start again. And as we sit, we begin to learn this in a kind of visceral and immediate way. We learn, for example, the ability to forgive—to see the resentments and the sufferings and the betrayals. Anybody in this room been betrayed? Don't bother to raise your hand. It's like human incarnation. We've been betrayed and we've been hurt by others. And not only that—anybody in this room hurt anybody else, ever? Never mind, don't raise your hand.

And instead of living in shame and guilt, and instead of living in anger and hatred and resentment, you begin to realize that that's not the way you want to tend your heart. It's not what you want to hold on to. And you begin to let things go and start

anew. There are all these beautiful practices of forgiveness that we teach here, and you're welcome to listen to the various online teachings or read books on those practices. You do them over and over, and gradually they change you.

So you start again with forgiveness. Everybody needs to learn it. We all have things to forgive and to ask forgiveness for.

And then you have to learn how to let go. My teacher Ajahn Chah said if you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll be a lot happy. If you let go completely, things will be easy for you. And I don't think he meant in letting go that you didn't have courage or dignity or care about things. But he meant the letting go of your views about how the world should be. Because it's just not that way. Sorry.

If in the last few years you haven't discarded a major opinion or acquired a new one, please check your pulse. You may have died. We are needing to renew ourselves.

And both with forgiveness and letting go, what you also learn in meditation is how to be present with your particular measure of suffering. Anybody not have a measure of suffering? Again, you can raise your hands and you can have your eight dollars back. We have this kind of irrational belief that pain can be avoided, that suffering can be avoided. Praise and blame, gain and loss.

One of the things that happens as we learn to meditate, and there grows this deepening sense of inner freedom, is that you grow in your capacity to bear witness to the suffering of life as well as to its beauty. When Martin Luther King said we will match your physical force with soul force, he spoke about a spirit in human beings that can see and allow ourselves to be touched by the sufferings of life and not drown in it, not have it take us over, because our spirit becomes strong in our capacity of compassion and presence.

So letting go doesn't mean that you don't have difficulties. In fact, I think in some way you actually become more aware of them as your spiritual practice deepens. And they teach you in a different way because you don't turn your gaze from the world. You see its tainted glory, its unbearable beauty, and its ocean of tears. And you become someone who's engaged and connected with the world because you have this capacity.

I remember when I was eight or nine years old. We were living in Buffalo, New York, and it was midwinter, so the snow was forty feet high or whatever it is. Buffalo gets a lot of snow. It was a blizzard with icy cold wind, and we all bundled up—my twin brother and I and my other brothers—to go out and play. I was skinny as a rail and shivering out there. And my twin brother looked at me and said, "It's not that cold." Wind chill was probably fifteen below or something. He said, "It's not that cold." He

took off his hat and started laughing. He took off his scarf and started laughing. He said, "It's not that cold." Then he took off his jacket and started laughing. He took off his sweater. He took off his shirt, and there he is half naked, just dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold."

It was a great moment. I've remembered it my whole life. I told him about it years later—he didn't even remember it. But it touched me in some really important way. He's somebody who has a very free spirit, and I learned something in that moment from him: that you can be present for the way things are and your spirit can be free. Or to put it another way, even in the midst of the sufferings of life, you can love anyway. You can forgive, you can let go of how it's supposed to be, and you sit and you practice and you love anyway.

So another story, and this is of Alvaro, whose father died. He had six siblings, and they fought. Some of them lied, greedy to get control of the family construction company. In two years, they nearly robbed Alvaro of his inheritance. But they were his family.

Parents of his beloved nieces and nephews, he'd been with them at every family gathering—weddings, holidays. Family was his life. And he realized he had to learn to live through broken trust, to find some deeper trust. After a year, he realized he could only trust them to be themselves. But he didn't want them to colonize his heart. He told his lawyer to use every legal means to protect his inheritance, but he would not give up loving them. By seeing them clearly, he regained a trust in himself, and through sometimes legally painful battles, he learned he could care for himself and trust in a new and wiser way.

There's something in sitting about learning how to trust yourself—your experience, and more than that, your capacity to be present for this human life that you've been given.

What helps? Here we are, living in a time in which we're fed the images and difficulties of the world—the continuing warfare, the racism, the environmental destruction. And yet, and yet, that's not the whole game. Because the world is also marvelous and beautiful and renewing itself. And people—there are a thousand acts of goodness probably for every act of cruelty. But they don't get measured, and they certainly don't get reported in the news.

So one of the things that helps is to set your intentions. Last month when we sat together in December, we did New Year's vows, Bodhisattva vows. Those of you who were here, we took time to reflect on what vows or intention we would want to use to set the

direction of our heart. And I read some traditional vows. In Zen you sit and recite: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." It's a very formal kind of vow-taking. And as I mentioned, sentient beings often don't want to be saved by you—but that's a whole other thing, especially the ones in your family. But it has a much deeper meaning. The meaning is that you vow to bring your goodness and your wisdom and your dignity and your blessings and your creativity to this world. That you vow to meet each experience or each person with compassion. And then it doesn't matter how many beings there are—all of them get met in that way.

People made their vows, and sometimes they were very simple ones. "My vow is to be kind to myself and others." Or, "My vow is to carry peace in a world where they're trying to get me to be afraid." Or, "My vow is to see beauty in every being that I meet, every person I encounter, every place I go." Those are pretty cool vows.

What was interesting in the years I lived in the Buddhist monastery is that we had to renew our vows every two weeks. We didn't wait for the calendar year to come around and say, "Oh yeah, made those New Year's resolutions, got about midway through January, and that was it." After two weeks you would meet and recite your vows again, acknowledge that you had broken them or hadn't fulfilled them so well, and then take them anew with someone as witness. It was a really beautiful ritual. It was the renewing that said we can start again. It is never too late to begin again.

So forgiveness, letting go, loving anyway—and with the vow, we start to set an intention to see the world in a different way. It's as if we carry an image: I could live with peace in my heart no matter where I go, or I could live with kindness toward myself and whomever I meet, or see beauty wherever I am.

As most of you know, in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the master poet Dante wrote this amazing work called The Divine Comedy. The entire Divine Comedy was inspired by Beatrice, by a single moment of love. It began when Dante was in Florence, standing near the Ponte Vecchio, this amazing medieval bridge that crosses the Arno River. It was just before 1300, and Dante saw this young woman, Beatrice, standing on the bridge. He was a young man, she a little younger, and she touched his heart. She ignited in him a vision that contained all of eternity. He didn't speak to her, and he saw her very little; then he spoke to her a bit, and then she died in the plague. Dante was stricken with loss, and she'd become somehow the carrier of some spirit, the bridge from his heart to something eternal. His whole work of the Divine Comedy was inspired by that moment of seeing her on the bridge.

Now, 650 years later, during World War II, the American army was moving up the Italian peninsula and the German army was retreating. The Germans were blowing up everything, including the bridges across the various rivers, to stop the Americans' progress. But no one wanted to blow up Ponte Vecchio because Beatrice had stood on it, and Dante had written about her. So the leaders of the German army made radio contact with the Americans, and in plain language they said they would leave Ponte Vecchio intact if the Americans would promise not to use it for their troops. And the promise held. The bridge was not blown up, and not one American soldier or piece of equipment crossed it. The bridge was spared in a modern, ruthless war because Beatrice had stood on it and Dante had fallen in love.

There's some way in each of us—you can remember the day you fell in love, on a spring day with the crocuses and the plum blossoms, or on an autumn day with that crisp smell of burning leaves, and you met your Beatrice or your Brent, whoever he or she was. And if you never fell in love because of the sufferings of your life, as Rumi says, today is a good day to start.

But there's something about remembering that your heart has been that open and that touched. And again, it inspires, it becomes part of the vow or the vision. I vow to live in this way in this world, to move through the world in this way. And it gives you a bigger picture of things.

Another story from this new book. This is about a woman. I started to collect these stories because I asked people about freedom, and I received all these letters and accounts.

Whitney went back to St. Louis because her mom was scheduled for hip surgery and her father was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. She wanted her parents to stay at home, but with each stage of their disability, it got harder and harder. Her brother, who lived nearby, was not involved at all. He wanted his sisters to help take care of it. You know how that happens in families.

So she took a leave from work. The house was in shambles, her father couldn't care for himself well, and her mom's fracture obviously was going to take a long time to heal. She knew they couldn't stay there. So she walked up the hillside she'd known growing up, and she wept. She didn't want to lose her childhood home. She wanted her parents to have their wish of staying there till the end. And she didn't want to lose her parents.

When she reached the top of the hill and opened her eyes, she sat as she had in meditation. And then she looked and saw the vast Midwestern fields stretched to the horizon, the sky filled with cumulus clouds, and the many small houses clustered at the edge of the town. Instinctively, she felt less alone. She could sense how everything had its seasons—arriving and departing, flourishing and struggling, coming into being, fading away. How many people, she wondered, are in the same predicament even this day in America, in Canada, in Europe, across the world?

As she breathed with more ease, her mind opened further. I'm not the only one with aging parents. And as the space opened, her heart settled. She felt more trust. And she realized: we can do this.

So meditation isn't really about having a goal of a particular state, although calm comes, well-being can come, joy and light can come at times. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's restless or lonely or anxious—all the kinds of emotions that we might struggle with arise. And that's all good. It's not that you're supposed to have a particular experience.

But what happens as you sit is that things begin to settle, and you realize that you're actually not in control. Who's in control of their mind here? Tell it not to think. All right, no more thought. I want you to stop thinking. Does it listen? It has a mind of its own. Or how about your emotions? I only want to have happy, positive emotions. Does your heart listen to that? Come on.

And you start to see that who you are is a river—a river of thoughts and perceptions and feelings, some of them healthier, some of them more destructive or unhealthy. But they're all changing, unstable, insecure. You sit and you also notice that no matter what you do, you can't have all pleasure and no pain. You can't have all gain and no loss. You can't have all praise and no blame. The world is woven with these opposites. Praise and blame come. Pleasure and pain. Gain and loss come. And you start to realize it is the way that it is.

And then there comes the realization that all the feelings and thoughts is not exactly who you are. I talk about this often because I like the image. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged. Face it. Wrinkles, drooping, turning gray, no fur left at all. All the kind of stuff. As Wes Nisker, my dear colleague and friend, says, the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. But the weird thing is that you don't feel older.

There you are looking in the mirror. You know that experience? And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body exists in time as an infant and a young child and a teenager and a young person, and it grows up middle-aged and older and so forth. But the one who knows, the witness of it, is awareness itself, is consciousness. And that doesn't exist in time.

And so as you sit, you begin to rest not in the manipulation of experience—although you can use your breath to quiet things—but you become more and more the witness of experience. You become what my teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows." You become loving awareness that says, "Oh, here's a happy thought, and there's a frightened thought, and here's this emotion that's delicious, and here's one that's deliciously awful." And you begin to sense all these things not as something you have to react to, but with a greater sense of spaciousness—like Whitney found on the hillside. There's a greater sense of presence and an ability to know that life is renewing itself in every breath, in every moment, and who you are is the witness to this game and this dance.

And so you can choose and guide yourself through it in skillful ways, but you don't get so lost and reactive and caught in it, because you say, "Ah, it's always going to renew itself in some new form." There grows a very deep trust—a trust not in the experience itself, but in the capacity of your heart to bear witness to it all with love and presence.

And when you meet somebody who's wise, that's kind of how they are. They say, "Yeah, this is how it is, the human incarnation. How's it going in there?" And you go, "Yeah, that's right. It's got its measure of sorrows and its measure of beauty."

A friend of mine who had practiced yoga and then done some kundalini yoga when she was in her late teens—eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—very avidly, got pregnant pretty young. She went into the hospital to have her first child, and she ended up being left alone part of the time, just the way it was back in those days—the late fifties or sixties, probably. Yoga was just becoming fashionable.

She was in long labor, and there was a lot of pain, as there often is in labor. She was somewhat frightened and didn't know what to do. She tried to do her yoga practice, did more breathing and so forth, which helped a little bit, but mostly it was just overwhelming. And then she said, all of a sudden something else happened. She said, "I felt this force like the kundalini or something just take over my body. And my body began to move with the contractions. And all of a sudden it wasn't my body."

She said this wild thing happened. "I became all the mothers of the world. I was there all by myself, and I realized it wasn't me, this person, giving birth to someone else. I became the world giving birth to itself, and I was all the women who'd ever had children, all the beings who'd birthed new beings out of their body." She said, "I realized that it wasn't personal to me at all, that I was part of some enormous life force that moved and lived through me."

And then she said, "I gave birth to this beautiful son, and then the kundalini kind of filled my body, and I was filled with light and I was trembling." And the doctor said, "What's the matter with you?" And they gave her a bunch of valium to kind of get rid of it. Because that's what they did in those days. Sorry about your kundalini, lady.

But the truth is that we know this. We know that there is a bigger game than your checkbook or your to-do list or the things that you have to manage. And you have to pay attention to them and take care with them with some impeccability and dignity. But that's not really what life is about. Yes, you have to serve and work in different ways. But you're also invited to have a free spirit.

And that's really the invitation of the Buddha. He said that all of these teachings are to offer what he called the sure heart's release—this capacity to be free in your being and in your spirit with praise and blame and gain and loss and pleasure and pain, all the things that make up human incarnation. To say, "Yes, this is so, and here we are. Isn't this amazing and beautiful?" And then you bring blessings where you are.

I had a friend who just came back from doing the three-month retreat that we have held annually for the last forty years at our center on the East Coast, Insight Meditation Society—just like we have an annual two-month retreat here for the last fifteen or sixteen years or more. People will come. For those of you who've never done a daylong or a week, it may sound crazy—and it is a little bit—but...

People will come, a whole group of them this winter. They'll be starting in a few weeks. There will be close to a hundred people who come in silence for two months to sit and meditate and be present.

One practitioner wrote about his experience. He said, "In the beginning I sat, and for the first few weeks there was a lot of pain. All the stored tension I carried in my body and the conflicts of the year—they all played out. And I just sat with them." Then eventually they released, and his mind became clear, like Ajahn Chah's description of a clear forest pool. And many rare and wonderful animals came and went, but he was still. He was the vast stillness of the pool.

He said that after a time, while resting in this state of presence, a deep compassion arose, as if Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, came—not as a person, but as a kind of inner strength, like an enormous cosmic tree. And he realized that compassion doesn't alleviate or take away pain. Rather, it gives us the strength to endure it. Kuan Yin is an energy provided out of compassion to help us make the long, difficult, painful journey of return to our own true nature. And the bodhisattvas and beings who serve the world are Kuan Yin's foot soldiers—beings who are little towers of strength and lend their care to others who are suffering.

He stayed in compassion as a practice for some two weeks, and then somehow it died away and he touched the place of stillness that the Buddha speaks of—profound calm and contentment and wisdom, a kind of peace in the midst of all things. He saw all the difficulties and trials and tribulations and afflictions of his own life and others, not as mistakes, but as opportunities for the heart to learn how to be truly free. That was really what his life was about. And he began to rest and trust more and more the stream of pure awareness outside of time, no beginning and no end.

Now, you listen to that and say, "Okay, well, that's nice. He had a good retreat." But I have to go to work tomorrow, and I've never done a day, or maybe I did a week, but it lasted for a while. I had that nice Vipassana facelift afterward—I felt just glorious for about three weeks, and then I got a call from my ex-husband and it all went away, or whatever.

But it's not really about retreat. It's about reminding us of something we know that's so true—that no matter what happens to you, no matter the circumstances of your life, you can return to this place of knowing, to become the one who knows. And we need it in these times, because things conspire in the culture around us to make us forget who we really are—to become consumers, or to become politicized, or to lose connection with our own deepest values.

This is from the poet Robert Frost. It was written a while ago, but it seems rather au courant. He says, "There's absolutely no reason for being rushed along with the rush." Isn't that a great line? There's absolutely no reason for being rushed along with the rush. Everyone should be free to go very slow. What you're hanging around in the world for is for something mysterious to occur for you.

He's inviting intuition, mystery, not to go along with the rush even though the rush is there. "Everyone should be free to go very slow." What a line. Of course, he was a poet—he'd sit around and write poetry lines. But when you come to meditation, or when you sit at home and you start to quiet the mind and soften the heart, this gives you the ability, the practice, to begin to see things in a new way.

And you need a practice, for most of us anyway, because the speed and intensity of our own thoughts and the world—driving and traveling and tending and being online nineteen hours a day and all the rest of it—can take you over. So a practice of just being with your breath, or a practice of the body scan, of moving your attention through your body and relaxing each part as you do. Or the practices we did of becoming the loving awareness and naming what arises: "There is worry. There is planning mind. There is doubt. Oh, and there's creativity. And there's a little bit of sadness or regret—thank you for noticing me. There's judgment—thank you for your opinion."

You start to notice the experiences, and as you do, you can also notice your reactions to them—your judgments, your fears, all of that. And more and more you become able to become the loving awareness itself, the witnessing of it that says, "Yes, this is part of being human. This is part of being human."

Going back to the story of the Buddha's awakening: on the night of his enlightenment, as most everybody knows from this famous story, the Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree and was attacked by Mara. Mara is the name for the Indian god who represents greed, hatred, ignorance, death, and delusion. Each time that Mara came to the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha remained unmoved and simply said, "I see you, Mara." At which point Mara threw up his hands at being recognized, skulked away, and then came in a new form—sometimes as temptation, sometimes as aggression, sometimes as doubt or worry.

In some later accounts, the Buddha even invited his old friend Mara to come back for tea once they'd kind of gotten through their relationship difficulties.

Mara appeared to Emily in the form of shame and confusion. Whenever money was tight or work was difficult, whenever she gained a couple of pounds or her ex-boyfriend called, Mara would attack her. It was a familiar pattern. From childhood, Emily held a sense that something was wrong with her. *I'm not charming enough, not good-looking, not smart or creative or fast enough.* The list went on and on.

Gradually, through her practice of mindfulness and loving awareness, Emily gained a more spacious perspective and was able to see Mara clearly. To do this, she first learned to feel her ever-changing breath, to witness her body's aches and pains with some equanimity and kindness. Then she learned to sit and be curious about the different states that visited her mind and heart. She learned to name them as the Buddha had: *Oh Mara, oh despair, oh shame. Is that you again? I see you.* What an amazing thing to be able to say. And then she learned to compassionately decline their grasp. *Even if you want to have tea, I can't let you stay too long because I have another engagement. Sorry.*

You begin to get a sense from that very simple account of your own freedom of heart—that you can be the witness to your fears or confusions, or in her case the shame or anxiety, and say, "Oh, yes, is that you again, Mara? Thank you for your opinion, your dance. Here's a little tea. Now I've got better things to do. Thank you." You don't want to struggle against it, because that's Mara itself. Instead, you become bigger. You become the loving awareness. And you become part of the whole.

Because as you get quiet, as the mind quiets and the heart softens, you start to feel that you're not separate from the world anymore. Your family and your community, the environment that we know so well, the air we breathe, the water that we drink—it's all a part of our body, a part of us. It turns out the earth is your body. This is just a little piece of your body that you tend to claim as your own. And Mother Teresa said, "The trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small." This whole world is your family. In most traditional cultures, they know that. They use all those honorifics of uncle and auntie and grandmother—it would be Uncle Barack and Auntie Hillary, Grandfather Bernie. And I don't know what you would say about Donald. We all have one in our family. We just say that. But they're respected as part of our extended human family. It's the way that it works.

Now, the way that politics is going, they want to sell you on terror and anxiety. That's how politics has pretty much always worked—make people afraid and then they'll support the dictator or the politician or whoever is going to keep them safe. But of course, life is more mysterious and uncertain than that. When you become comfortable with change and uncertainty, when you become comfortable taking your seat in the middle of your human incarnation just as you are—with the joys and sorrows, with your blessings and capacities, with your struggles—and you become the witness of it, you become the loving awareness, then whole different capacities open in you. You feel fulfilled. You're not always looking to be loved or admired, because you admire yourself and you love yourself. You value yourself and you value others.

I remember reading Krishnamurti years ago. He had all these highfalutin things about the nature of consciousness and mind. It was kind of cool, but sometimes a little hard to understand. He was sometimes a bit of a scold—"You should understand, but you don't." Come on, Krishnamurti, give me a break. But the passage that really stuck out for me, when he talked about awakening, he said: if you're going along the road and there's a big stone in the road, even if you can avoid it, you move it over to the side. Because it's not your road—it's our road.

I took that to heart. I read that when I was maybe nineteen. In fact, even when I'm driving, if there's something dangerous in the road, I pull over if I possibly can and get it out of the road—partly in honor of what I read, but also partly as a symbol of what I'm learning, which is to care for us, to care for our family.

And so you get quiet, and then what else is there to do? Some of these people are hungry—you feed them. There's injustice—you do what you can to alleviate it.

I remember last month I was talking about all the migrants and refugees, which we may well be seeing more of, and the fears that people are trying to put into your mind about immigrants and refugees. I asked how many people would be willing to consider, if you could, taking a Syrian refugee—a child or a woman—into your own home. And half the hands went up. Thank you, everybody whose hands went up, those of you who are here tonight. Because that's what happens. You get quiet, and there comes to you a sense of belonging that's different than the desire and the struggle. There comes in the sitting a sense of connection with your own inner dignity and well-being, and with that sense of vastness of time, stepping out of time. And then you tend the world. And you don't do it just because you're supposed to, or it's a good bodhisattva thing to do, or you feel worried.

I've told this story quite a few times in the last couple of years. Wes Nisker, colleague and friend who teaches here, went to interview Gary Snyder—the great poet, Pulitzer Prize–winning environmentalist, author of *Earth House Hold*, a truly great icon of the American environmental movement, who's now eighty-four. Wes said, "Gary, you now see the environmental destruction, the loss of species, the problems with the rising ocean, climate change. What advice do you have for us at this time?" And Gary looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt or anger. Those are the things that actually made the problem. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it."

And love is really the only force that's big enough to counter the forces of greed and hatred and ignorance in the world. It's the force that allows mothers to lift cars off their children. It's that great capacity of the heart.

Friends of mine were recently in Dharamsala this past fall, and there was a special gathering—they helped to arrange it—with Archbishop Tutu from South Africa and the Dalai Lama. They were spending a week together doing a dialogue to create a book on joy. If you've ever seen Tutu, he laughs a lot. He has this kind of giggle, and he's totally wonderful. And of course, I think people go to see the Dalai Lama mostly to hear him laugh. Yes, those nice Tibetan teachings and so forth, but really—the laughter. Annie Lamott, our local wonderful writer and humorist, says laughter is carbonated holiness.

And the people who were there in Dharamsala said these two were like kids. They set each other off and they giggled and laughed through a good part of that whole week of teachings on happiness.

This is the invitation: that you become the steward of your own heart in a wise way, that you train and practice what it means to stay present. So that when Mara visits—and Mara is kind of amazing, he gets around, ancient India no problem, modern San Francisco, wherever you live, here he is—when Mara comes, you can say, "Oh, I see you, Mara," and not get lost in the fear and the confusion and the suffering.

This is not to say that there doesn't need to be tenderness and healing for us, that we have traumas that need care, that there are pains that really need to be tended to. But that's not the end of the story. The First Noble Truth of the Buddha's teaching is that life has suffering in it, so you can't make it perfect, without pain or suffering. But that's the beginning of the story. The Second Noble Truth is that there's a cause to it, and the Third Noble Truth is that there's an end to it. And the end to it is really the freedom of spirit and freedom of heart—your own joy. Carbonated holiness.

And you have this in you. You have seeds of beauty. You have undeniable dignity, dignity that you were born with, that cannot be taken from you. You have a fundamental goodness that was born in you, and an innocence that can't be taken, that's inviolable in the human spirit.

And so we meditate not to become good meditators or to have experiences, although those come and they're wonderful, but really to learn this deeper trust, this capacity to be present with a loving heart and with wisdom.

So let's do a little meditation together, just for a few minutes, a little reflection. As you sit quietly, I'll ask you a few simple questions: What in your life wants to, or needs to, be held in compassion? What in your life wants forgiveness? What in your life is it time to let go of?

What in your life asks for your courage? And what in your life brings beauty and joy?

It's beautiful just to stop and reflect. Because when you listen, the heart actually will answer. And it's never too late. The heart is always waiting for you to ask and listen. Never too late to start again.

I'd like us to end with a very simple chant before we go out into the delicious rainy evening.

I do want to thank the volunteers. We have a really beautiful crew of volunteers, some of whom have been doing this for years and years with a lot of care and love. Some are newer. I'm very, very grateful to you all.

So here is the chant we'll do. In India, when you meet someone, the most common greeting is to put your hands together and say *namaste*, which means "I honor the divine within you. I see who you really are." Not the cloak of your body and garments and roles and all of that, but the spirit behind those eyes. I see who you really are.

The root of that word *namaste* in Sanskrit is the word *namo*, which means to pay respects or bow to. And so I'd like us to chant *namo* nine times. As you do, you can feel in yourself what it is that needs to be bowed to with respect. It might be beautiful things. It might be Mara coming, and you saying, "Oh yeah, I see you." It might be something in the world that you want to offer your loving respect to. We'll chant it nine times and then go out into the damp evening, the blessed rain.

Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo.

And may you carry the stillness of the temple and the remembrance of the heart—anything that was of value and touched you tonight. Carry this and bring it back to bring blessings wherever you go.

Thank you so much for coming. Good night.

CHAPTER 69

Monday Night Class Dharma Talk - Nobility and Love

Jack Kornfield · 1h08

> *In this President's Day talk, Jack Kornfield reflects on the noble leadership exemplified by Washington and Lincoln, connecting their integrity and vision to the Buddha's teachings on wise leadership. Drawing from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, he explores how qualities like generosity, uprightness, patience, and inclusiveness can be trained through meditation practice, transforming ideals into lived experience.*
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> *The talk seamlessly transitions into Valentine's Day themes, examining the many dimensions of love—from erotic to agape—through the lens of Buddhist practice. Kornfield shares Thich Nhat Hanh's personal love story and his own experience of falling in love at 70, illustrating how loving awareness deepens with practice and maturity. He discusses how mindfulness cultivates radical intimacy, citing Zen Master Dōgen's teaching that enlightenment is becoming intimate with the world.*
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> *Through the Buddha's teachings on the brahmavihāras and a poignant African folktale about a sky maiden, Kornfield illuminates how true love requires respect rather than possession, and how emptiness is pregnant with possibility. The teaching concludes with a guided mettā meditation, inviting practitioners to remember their innate nobility and extend loving-kindness to all beings. As Stephen Levine asked: if you had only one phone call to make, who would you call and what would you say—and why are you waiting?*

So please let yourself come back in and get settled.

It's a pleasure to be back. I'm now teaching Monday nights once a month after sabbatical. I was partly turning seventy and thinking, I want time to do other things as well, but it's still always a treat to come back here. This last month has been about putting finishing touches on a new book, which of course takes about a year for the publishers to get out, but for me it was very good to deliver it and have it finished. There have been weddings, funerals, and things in between. That's how it is in this human incarnation, isn't it?

For those of you who haven't come before, the teachings are not so much something you are called on to remember—no quiz at the end or anything like that. More importantly, they're a reminder at best of something that you already know and already carry in your own heart. When it touches you in that way and reminds you, beautiful. And if it doesn't seem helpful, then let it go.

In the same way, you could feel in the sitting we just did, especially those of you who are newer to mindfulness practice, that the focus isn't on having a particular experience or being able to concentrate on your breath or achieving some particular goal. The focus is actually to become present, to quiet yourself a little bit, to open your heart, and to listen to what's happening in your own body and your own mind and all of the stories and relationships and things that make up your life. They reveal themselves in that loving awareness.

Today is President's Day. Back in the hoary times when I was young, we had Washington's birthday and Lincoln's birthday as separate holidays. Now, for efficiency, they've combined them somehow. But it was actually much more charming to have them separate because you got to reflect on those particular presidents and leaders.

One of the stories I most love about George Washington is that after his time in the presidency, there were many people who wanted him to become king. I don't know if you know that history, but there was a lot of pressure. Basically, it was part of everybody's psyche at the time—democracy was quite new and unfamiliar. The thinking was: we got freedom from the King of England, now we need a new king. You're a magnificent guy, you've been president, why don't you just finish it and become king? One of George Washington's greatest acts as president was refusing to become king and instead saying, no, this is a new experiment here in this particular form—a lot of it actually came from the Iroquois Nation, the Iroquois Confederacy. He retired to Mount Vernon and said, elect the next president. So thank you, George Washington.

And then Lincoln's birthday. When I go to Washington, D.C. periodically, I try to visit the memorials there. They move me deeply—to go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and touch that long black wall and the names on it. And to go into the Lincoln Memorial, which always brings me to tears.

There, above that huge statue of Lincoln seated, it says: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." It's built as a mirror of a Greek temple. You feel that you're entering a sacred place, a holy place. On one side, engraved, is the Gettysburg Address that you

all had to learn—at least in my generation—by heart. On the other side is text inscribed in marble from portions of his second inaugural address, which he gave not many months before he was assassinated, when the Civil War was still raging.

It has these words: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." I think about Syria and Lebanon and Libya and Yemen and the various places where there's war. Fondly do we hope and fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

"Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

And then finally, the words end in this closing of reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Really extraordinary words and extraordinary leadership.

I think about the national conversation that's happening now—Black Lives Matter, racism, diversity—and then go back to this, 150 years ago, saying: if we suffer, if the war continues until every drop of blood drawn with the lash is paid by another drawn by the sword, so we will do it. What an amazing thing to say. There's a sense of justice in his words and a kind of integrity in the midst of unbearable suffering. That is real leadership.

When we celebrate President's Day—as it is now, with President's Day sales in the stores—there really is a reason for it if we let ourselves go back to this part of who we are as a people on this particular part of the earth.

It resonates like the teachings of the Buddha, because of course the dilemma of racism and the suffering that Lincoln spoke of is not over. The Buddha said that the Dharma, the teachings of awakening and compassion, welcome all who are interested in awakening. The Dharma gates are open for you. Whatever your race, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your ability, whatever you look like, whatever your birth—as the Buddha says, not by birth, nor caste, nor race, nor creed, none of those things makes a human being noble, but solely the nobility of heart. For those who wish to join this path of awakening and nobility, please come and be part of this. Let us change the way human beings live. Let's change the world.

So many Buddhist texts begin with the words "O nobly born," which is a reminder of who you really are. There's a beautiful poem by William Stafford with a line that says maybe if you were exchanged in the cradle and no one told you what your parentage is, you sit quietly and wonder—maybe you're a queen, maybe you're a king.

This quality of nobility that Lincoln carried, and Washington did in refusing to be the king, is really the quality of wise leadership. I'm talking about it because it's President's Day, but also because you're all leaders. You might be a leader in your family or in your community or with your friends, but we all have at times the role of leadership. It's part of what's given to us in the human incarnation. And what's possible in leadership is the ability to bring what we train in meditation practice—loving awareness, compassion, the balance of mindfulness, generosity of spirit—to those around you.

Last spring when I went to the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering and was able to give the summary talk to White House staff and folks from the State Department, I noted that the Buddha in his time was actually quite conversant with and spent time with the leadership around him. There are all these texts and stories of his teachings to ministers and kings and princes, wealthy courtesans, movers and shakers of his time.

One of the most beautiful texts is the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, where the Buddha says: if a nation or society comes together in harmony, listens to one another in harmony and departs in harmony; if they treat all members of society with respect; if they protect those who are vulnerable—children, women, those who are older, those who are sick; if they tend the teachings of their ancestors and elders that carry wisdom; and if they tend the natural environment around them—then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. All these teachings on wise leadership.

There's a whole text in which the Buddha speaks about the nobility of our human capacity to lead those around us in a wise way. And because he was a list maker—he liked to make lists, so there are a zillion Buddhist lists: the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the twelve nidanas, the fifty-two mental factors, the Four Noble Truths, the five spiritual faculties, the three characteristics—he talks about leadership in times of change. Anybody notice what times we're living in?

It was the great chemist Lavoisier who said: nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed. This is the essence of chemical equations—you take things and they get combined, moved, changed around. Everything is transformed. This is the reality of our human incarnation: everything is being transformed, including our own thoughts and feelings, body and mind, the culture and the global environment we live in.

So how do we navigate in this change? Wise leadership, in this particular list, the Buddha says, starts with generosity—a generous heart. A generous leader, imagine that. Then it includes uprightness, which is an older, more Victorian word for integrity. Wise leadership, your work as a leader wherever you are, asks for generosity and integrity. It also asks for non-harming—that part of integrity is to not cause harm to yourself or others. Steadiness. Sacrifice—isn't that interesting? There's something noble about being able to put your own needs and desires in a greater context, to say what really matters is that I offer this to the whole. Flexibility—the Buddha says being flexible and not rigid. Patience. Inclusiveness—the wise leader doesn't lead alone but gathers others around them, like Lincoln did. You know that beautiful book, *Team of Rivals*, in which Lincoln took the people who were his political adversaries and put them all into his cabinet. He said, "I need you to help me figure out what to do in this Civil War time, and we can't be fighting one another." An inclusive kind of leadership. And then the vision and trust that goes with that vision.

The beautiful thing—which I said at the White House as well—is not that these are good ideals or good ideas. They are. So what? The Greeks had them, the African kings had them, the Maya had them. Whoever it is around the world, we can find them. The important thing is that they can be trained, that they can be awakened in us, which is really why we do these remarkable practices of compassion and mindfulness and equanimity.

Each one of these qualities actually leads to a practice. Generosity can be a practice. One of my practices with generosity, which I've done for twenty-five, thirty years, is that if I have a generous thought to give something or to serve or to do something for someone, I do it. Because you have that nice thought—"Oh yeah, I should do this," or "Wouldn't that be great to give that"—and then immediately comes all those little people that live inside that say, "Oh, you know, that's going to be a lot of trouble," or "You might need that," or "That's too much," or "You've got other things to do." Do you know those voices? Do you have them? Yes, you do. I know you do. I know you. Because we're human.

But the practice—it's a really beautiful one—is when that generous impulse arises, I just say, okay, I'll do it. There might be a few exceptions, and I don't judge myself, but mostly for the last thirty years when that impulse has come, I've done it, and I never regret it. The beautiful thing is not just that this nobility and dignity is some ideal thing, but that it's something you can practice and deepen and learn.

Now it turns out, since we're not only talking about President's Day but Valentine's Day, that love too can be practiced and awakened. The modern neuroscience research on social and emotional learning for young children, empathy training, the work done at Yale and the CASEL Consortium—all kinds of studies show that kids three, four, five, six years old have naturally generous impulses as well as naturally violent impulses. "Don't hit her with a block. Use your words," right? Except that we really want to tell that to Bashar al-Assad and Putin. The kindergartners get it. Can't we get those older people to figure this out?

It turns out there is a natural empathy in kids. The Yale studies show that infants who are pre-verbal, less than a year old—by watching their eyes tracking and their responses—they get upset if there's a crying child, if something is missing or taken away. If someone drops something, they want to help that person pick it up. There is an innate connection between us as human beings. I mean, there you were in somebody's belly, after all. Let's get real about this. Isn't that weird? You lived in somebody's belly. "Oh, I'm independent." Yeah, right. Give me a break. You lived in someone else's body. It's really wild.

So these things—empathy, love, compassion—can also be trained and awakened. They're not ideals. They are really the wedding of something magnificent, like Lincoln's words, to something that's really personal and intimate.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote this beautiful book on love. You read his books, and he's managed somehow to take, in some cases, very complicated and rather profound Dharma teachings and simplify them so that you can't deny them. They're just so beautiful.

So I get this new Thich Nhat Hanh book. I want to read it partly because I love his teaching, partly because I want to steal stories or whatever I can from it—a little professional grab there. I'm reading, and it's going to be about love and compassion and sympathetic joy and so forth, the Brahma Viharas, the Buddhist teachings on the awakened heart. It's fine, it's beautiful. And then I turn the page to chapter two, and it begins: "She was just nineteen years old when I saw her first walk down the stairs in that temple in Chu Lai"—in Vietnam.

This book of teachings on love, it turns out, were teachings that Thich Nhat Hanh gave to his community in Plum Village some years ago. I can picture everybody sitting there hearing Thich Nhat Hanh speak about the Brahma Viharas and the awakened heart and the Buddha's teachings on love. And then he pauses and says, "She was just nineteen when I saw her walk down the stairs." All of a sudden—it was in France too—everybody sits up. "Ooh, now this is something I really want to hear."

The book has a love story in every other chapter. Not love that was consummated, because he was a monk and she was a nun, and in this case they behaved. Not always true, but in their case they were. But it talks about his own personal love for this young woman—he was young too—and what that meant to him. There's something so beautiful because it weds what we really long for: that wedding of the personal, to really love another or others, and at the same time to have that love open us to something greater.

And again, I'm somehow, even as I say these words, still back with those words of Abraham Lincoln. I can't help it, because they're so compelling. And there's some way in his leadership that it was really a leadership of love. There was a nobility and a dignity to it. He was somehow tuned into a kind of love that in the midst of the fire of the Civil War still carried some deeper capacity for human beings to live in a different way.

And so here's Thich Nhat Hanh writing about it, and you can't help but want to turn the page. The scent of love—Rumi talks about love dogs, their tails start wagging as soon as a little love is in the room.

And I'm so happy because at age seventy, in these last years since I was divorced, I am in a relationship with Trudy Goodman, who's a colleague and teacher I've known for years and years. And I got to fall in love again in my late sixties. And it's been totally wonderful.

We realized that at seventy—we're five weeks apart in age, so we had our seventieth birthday—and we said, we don't know how much time we have. Of course, nobody does, actually. But as you get into your seventies, it becomes, how do you say, more real and apparent. And so, you know, let's really do it. Let's live it up. And it's beautiful to see that at this age, I've actually learned some things about love. There's a great affection and so much more accepting and appreciating of one another.

And it's not that there can't be some moments of—you know, those moments of a little irritation or something. For example, she likes me to drive, which I'm happy to do. I like driving. I was a cab driver in Boston for a few years when I was in graduate school. I have bad driving habits, but I can get through the traffic, whatever. And if I drive, she's supposed to navigate. She's not a very good navigator. It's just, you know. And then she tries to use Siri, but her Siri app, because she speaks fluent French, is in French. It's a Frenchman's voice, a very charming voice. "Go in this direction, go there." I can't even understand what the poor guy is saying, but she finds it charming, right? So we're kind of lost periodically. And I could get annoyed. In fact, I do.

And then I look over and I say, what is the hurry? You're in this car with this beautiful woman that you love. I mean, what better thing to do than be together and have a good time?

And so there's something about having lived through these years of learning to be in relationship, that the love is so much bigger than the stuff that happens. We don't actually have very much stuff between us, Trudy and I. But there's something so sweet. Even the stuff becomes interesting in that way. It's like, oh yeah, look at that. That's very human, and there we are.

Loving awareness, which is what you train when you sit with your own pains and pleasures of your body, or with the emotions of sadness or grief or trauma or loss or longing or love and joy and bliss—loving awareness is a kind of radical intimacy. The Zen master Dogen said, to be enlightened is to become intimate with the world. And you become so close to your experience that you can somehow see into the heart of things, your own or the heart of another being. And what you start to see is that you're not separate, that as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we inter-are.

I was just part of a wedding ceremony that was led by a Hawaiian kahuna, a Hawaiian native healer and wise man. And part of the wedding ceremony, he had the bride and the groom put their noses just next to each other and breathe together, breathe in and out. Prana, it is in Sanskrit, but I don't remember the Hawaiian word he used—but it was just to let us know that we are really breathing together on this earth, and that we link our breath in this way to remind us that we are really united and connected. It was a really beautiful moment, having them put their noses next to each other and breathe for a while.

And of course, all the modern interpersonal neurobiology, all the science and so forth, and the mirror neurons and all that.

Yeah, the scientists have found out that we're connected. Thank you. Of course we are. We're wildly connected.

When I was in India, you know, more than thirty years ago, traveling, the person I was traveling with had this terrible dream about somebody dying in her family. And I said, no, no, no, that's just part of meditation. You go through birth and death and all the things in you show themselves. That's natural.

I was wrong. Turned out, ten days later, she got a telegram. Her brother had died. And when we looked at the day, it was the same day that she had that vision. And he died in the way that she'd seen.

You've all heard those stories. How many people have had some experience like that? You look around—many, many. Do you know why you know these things? Because we really are connected. And we lose those channels some, because our consciousness becomes much more tuned to the everyday, if you will. But it is a reality. We are connected in consciousness.

Just as we're connected in breath—you who are breathing here, breathing the air of her and him. Oh no, all the cooties and germs and whatever. Too late, baby. We're in it together. We are inter-breathing and we're inter-living. And we also inter-live with the plants and, of course, with the earth around us that needs a little more attention in this way.

So if mindfulness and loving awareness is really a practice of intimacy, it means to be present for yourself or another without trying to fix what's there, but to listen deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. To connect, to feel that connection, to keep your heart open with that other person or yourself or those people, and then from that place to respond.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who's the son of Chogyam Trungpa, taught here one Monday night, and I've gotten to know him a little bit. He wrote a book. He's a great horseman—that's sort of his passion in this life. He writes a story about taking his horse, Rocky, way up in the high mountains in Colorado on a trail at like eleven thousand feet. Rocky's a trail horse, one that's used to galloping and so forth through the woods and kind of more in the lowlands, so he's not really used to mountain trails. But he took his horse, Rocky, with a couple of other people.

They were going on this very narrow trail with a steep drop-off. It was steep above and then a thousand feet of scree down below, and this narrow trail. He said, we were just about to go on the narrow part of the trail, and I got afraid. This Tibetan Lama got afraid. Thank you. That's just human, right? Let's not glorify all this.

And then he said, I thought, well, if the horse stumbles—because Rocky was a little nervous about it—maybe I should sit a little bit over on this side of the saddle so that if he falls, I can sort of bail and save myself. So we were about to go there, and I shifted myself in the saddle. And then Rocky turned his head and looked at me like saying, "Dude, I thought we were in this together."

And he said, oh, I got it. And I shifted back in the center of the saddle. I said, all right, we can do this. And Rocky took it a little slow and I was there with him and we made it.

So there's something about loving awareness and mindfulness that we're training that is both an intimacy with our experience or with others—not fixing, but seeing the way things are. And then, with an open heart, when you see it clearly, as he did, you can respond. Say, oh yeah, let me shift back to the center of the saddle. Let's do this together.

It allows us to tune to ourselves and tune to another in a wise way.

Now, there's all this science research on mindfulness that everybody knows about—it's become the big thing. There was yoga and now there's mindfulness. And now there's starting to be a lot of research on compassion, which I'm very happy about. I'm actually glad they're researching compassion rather than metta and loving-kindness, because love is such a confusing word in our culture. Everybody kind of gets compassion. You have to be at least somewhat caring, responding to others' concerns, or having compassion for yourself. But love is really rather complex in our minds.

I mean, it's such a big thing. It's the birds and the bees and the glorious awakening of spring that we're about to live through, that we are living through here. It's the prime mover. Maybe love is like gravity—we're pulled to one another because we remember our time in the womb when we were in another person's body, or we remember being back in the Big Bang when we were all living together in that singularity. Then we sort of turned into starlight and congealed, and who knew the earth turned into you.

It's so mysterious. Your spirit and starlight somehow congealed on this particular planet. The green leaves that you see all around you do a magic thing of turning light into sugar. I mean, what an amazing thing. Let's turn light into sugar so that everybody can eat. Is that ever cool? So that's you. You live on sunlight, basically, through the plants and animals, or whatever your diet is.

Anyway, there are all these different kinds of love. I love chocolate. I love the Warriors—I hope they win all these games. So there's that kind of love. There's businessman's love: I'll love you if you give me this, and you can love me and I'll give you that back. That's a fine kind of love. There's familial love for people in your family, when it works. There's brotherly and sisterly love. Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love, of compadres, of caring for one another.

There is—how shall I call it?—infatuation love. Oh baby, I need you, I need you. A million songs on the radio. Teenage love, if you will, which is magnificent. It's really an amazing thing. There's platonic love. There's erotic love.

And erotic love is really an interesting thing, because in many Buddhist texts—which were descriptions of the Buddha teaching monks and nuns—there is a very strong teaching about the dangers or the problems with sexuality and sensuality for renunciates. Sexual desire and the body are seen as something to get over, something not right. But it turns out there are these other texts and teachings, not as many of them but some, in which the Buddha says that for householders—you, me, lay people—this is one of the pleasures of household life. And if there were not pleasure of this sort, people would not choose to be householders.

He goes on to say that happiness exists in household life. What is that happiness? It's a satisfaction gained through the senses: beautiful sights and sounds and tastes and smells and touches and connections with one another. These experiences are attractive, desirable, pleasant, appealing, and worthy experiences. Experiences through the senses are the advantage of household life, so you get to enjoy them. The happiness one derives from these benefits is indeed a happiness that one can learn to enjoy.

So there are these rather mixed messages you get in Buddhist teachings. One great meditation master we brought from Burma, Mahasi Sayadaw—somebody asked him about sex. And he said, "Gross, base, and disgusting." That was his response. We were in our twenties and thirties then, and we thought, okay, that's what he has to say. And then at the end of this long retreat, he came and he left.

It was one of our three-month silent retreats. Afterward, we had Dharma Follies, which was a time for people who'd been silent for three months to express other parts of themselves—to sing and dance and whatever else they wished. I remember a comic routine that Anita Sanders did. She got up and robed herself like she was Mahasi Sayadaw, and she said, "And now I would like to speak about something that is engrossing, basic, and worth discussing"—which was her mirror of "gross, base, and disgusting." No, she insisted, it's engrossing, basic, and worth discussing.

But part of Eros—the thing about Eros as one of the Greek gods, or in India where there are all these fantastic erotic deities and stories—is that it brings us closer to the gods. When we make love, there's pleasure and ecstasy, there's surrender from yourself. There's the petit mort, a dying in some way, an orgasm, and then you have an experience beyond yourself, a union. All of those things, plus the mystery of getting back to where you came from. It's physical and basic in some way, but also so mysterious that it's woven into us. We have these bodies that are built around Eros, among other things. And so there are all these different kinds of love.

And then there's agape. There is metta in its deepest sense, which is love for no reason, which is just love. I've seen it in the teachers and people I admire—both the nobility and the love in Aung San Suu Kyi after seventeen years of prison, carrying so much love for her people. Or Maha Ghosananda, my friend and teacher who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, leading love walks back for people who'd lost everything and doing loving-kindness as a practice through the killing fields to reclaim their land and their hearts.

I've spent a lot of time in these last years with Ram Dass. He has this big altar in his house in Hawaii because he doesn't travel anymore. He's been in a wheelchair for sixteen years now, and he's eighty-four. On the altar are the different Hindu gods—Krishna and Ram and Sita and Ganesh. And then, of course, there's Mother Mary, a beautiful picture of Jesus, Solomon, a page from the Koran on the mercy of Allah. There are pictures of saints like Neem Karoli Baba and Anandamayi Ma, Indian saints, and Mother Teresa. It's this magnificent, huge altar full of all these great beings.

And then on this altar he always has a few political pictures. He had Dick Cheney for a while, John Boehner. I'm sure he's going to put Scalia on there. And he says, "If I'm to love, why should I make boundaries about my love? And why would I not want Dick Cheney, of all people, to remember love? Why wouldn't I want him to remember that? So he's part of my love practice."

Ram Dass will sit there and say, "I love everything. I love Dick Cheney and Boehner and Anandamayi Ma and Mother Mary and Kuan Yin and that chair over there and you and you and the wallpaper and even the tree outside." He did that for a while. A filmmaker friend of ours was there and said, "Really, you love this dirty carpet?" He said, "Oh, I do. I love everything." Some weeks later, that friend sent him, in a beautiful gold frame, a little square of dirty carpet and said, "I put this on your altar next to all those holy people." Ram Dass said, "Certainly I will."

There's something in these times of such political rancor and estrangement about being able to rest in the noble heart, in the heart of love anyway. It doesn't mean you don't act politically or do what you think is best—but you do it from that place of love.

When Richard Nixon was invited back to the White House during the Carter administration, there was a gathering where they brought the ex-presidents together. This was the first time Nixon had returned after he'd been deposed—the only president, I think, who was essentially kicked out of office for misconduct in U.S. history. Imagine the level of humiliation and shame that must have been, no matter what he did. He

came in, and there were some of the other ex-presidents, and he stood alone by himself. Then Jimmy Carter went over to him, shook his hand, kind of pulled him in, and said, "Mr. President, welcome home."

It was apparently a turning point in Nixon's life—feeling like he wasn't a complete failure, that some healing was possible. And of course, Jimmy Carter is someone who has used his ex-presidency as a Nobel laureate now in the most magnificent ways.

This is really what's possible. The invitation of the Dharma is to remember that this is in you as well. And you can practice it—loving-kindness, mindfulness.

My dear friend and colleague Sharon Salzberg was practicing in Burma, doing her metta: "May I be safe, may I be well, may I be happy"—all the phrases of loving-kindness. She said it felt very dry and mechanical, but she kept doing it because the teacher said it would work sometime. She's physically kind of awkward, she said. One afternoon she was doing her metta practice and picked up a tray with a plate and a glass. She dropped it and they all smashed on the floor. She heard her voice inside say, "You're such a klutz." And then: "I love you." She said, "Oh, it's working."

What you practice, what seeds you plant, transforms your heart. And then you can use it to move from estrangement or violence or difficulties to begin to build bridges of love—while you stay in your own dignity, your own nobility.

I like that St. Valentine's Day has this very complicated history, but in the simplest way, here's the saint part that represents the spiritual, and then the erotic part, which is actually very human. And those two are wedded together.

I guess I'll tell you this story. Let's see if I have time.

And for months they were happy together. But one day, while the new wife was out, his curiosity became so intense that he crept over to the box and opened it. To his surprise, it had nothing inside.

When she got home, she looked at his face and she knew. She said, "You opened the box, didn't you?"

"Yes," said the young man, "but it was empty. So what's so secret about an empty box?"

The sky woman was devastated, and a tear trickled down her cheeks. She said, "I'm sorry, but I can't live with you any longer."

"Why? What's so terrible about peeking into an empty box?"

"I'm not leaving you because you opened the box," said the young woman. "We all do that at times, right? I'm leaving because you said it was empty. It wasn't empty. It was full of sky—full of the light and air and smells of my parents' home. When I went back to the sky village where I lived that last time, I filled the box with everything that was precious to me. And how can I be your wife when what is most precious to me is emptiness to you?"

Some of these stories don't work out quite the way you'd like them to, the happily-ever-after part. But there's something really profound here. I could take a whole evening just to unpack the images of that story.

Part of it is that our love really requires that we respect one another—that true love is not possessive love. "I'm going to have what you have, or look into what you have." There has to be a respect for what we agree to, for who we are with one another. So that's a piece of it. Love is not possessive.

If it's possessive, then it's possessiveness, but it's different than love. And you'll notice your children don't like to be clung to, don't like you deciding how they should be. Your partners don't like it. Love is very different than that kind of attachment.

The Buddha says, "This land is mine, these children are mine"—these are the words of folly of a man who doesn't realize that even he isn't his. You don't even control your own thoughts very well, do you? What are you going to possess? So love isn't about possession, but it is about making the space of love that can acknowledge and respect with a kind of caring connection.

And then it's mysterious. The emptiness of that box—because emptiness is so central to Buddhist teaching—speaks to how things are ephemeral, how they arise and pass away. Nothing can be possessed, including your own life, which eventually will end. That's the big mystery. In Zen, they use poetic images of the blackbird singing in the dead of night, or the white crane standing in the snow. Those are poems that speak about something ineffable, the pregnancy of emptiness. That box wasn't empty. It was full of possibility. It was full of sky and space and beauty, if we can see it. And Eros and presence and loving awareness has as much as anything a kind of wonder in it, mystery and intimacy. Instead of possession, it sees the secret beauty of every being, the nobility of every being, and holds their pain with mercy and tenderness.

Most of you who knew him know that Stephen Levine died some weeks ago. We'll do a big memorial here that people will be welcome to come to in May. His teaching was really about this kind of tenderness and mercy. He would say, "Simply touching a difficult memory with the slightest willingness to heal begins to soften the holding and ten-

sion around it. If there's a single definition of healing, it's to enter with mercy and awareness those pains, mental and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment or fear or dismay." His whole work was really inviting this kind of intimacy—both with what's painful and with what's beautiful—getting people to learn forgiveness, getting people to learn to love in a deeper way. And more than anything, since he wrote and worked so often with people at the end of their lives, he would say—not to those who were dying but to those around them—"If you were going to die soon and had only one phone call you could make, who would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting?"

We are both timeless beings of spirit and tender, vulnerable humans. We have survival in us. Every one of you is courageous. Every one of you has nobility. Courage beyond measure you have, because you're still here. You've gone through so many things. And somehow when we sit in meditation, the invitation of nobility and dignity—like the leadership we started with—is to come back to this place of fertile emptiness, of spaciousness, of the pregnant silence that can tend our own bodies and hearts and minds, that can sense that we live in both the immediacy of our life and in eternity.

Then things start to take a different cast. You pick up the cobbled skin of an orange and smell it and think, how mysterious that there's this globe of sweet sugar water with an orange flavor shipped to you from some orchard in Southern California or Florida. Or you pick up the tender golden skin of an apricot that's so fuzzy and soft with its golden glow. What an amazing planet we live on that has things like this. Or the plum blossoms that have come out—they're so delicate, and the scent, and here they are. "Hi, for your enjoyment, we're going to put plum blossoms on your planet." It's amazing.

The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. As you train yourself in love, as you remember that you can carry dignity and integrity and generosity, that the nobility the Buddha invites you to remember—O nobly born—is there within you, you discover that wherever you are in life, no matter how terrible the circumstances on certain days or how beautiful, they're workable. Because your heart has in it more freedom and compassion than you could imagine. O nobly born, this is your true nature. And the invitation of the meditation and the practices and trainings is to come back to this, to feel it and strengthen it and know it.

So let's do a few minutes of metta, loving-kindness practice, as a way to end the evening.

The instructions from the Buddha for those who seek love: May you be able and upright, straightforward, of gentle speech, content and unburdened. May you do nothing mean or that the wise would reprove. And may you live with these intentions: May beings everywhere be happy. May they live in safety and joy.

As a mother watches over her child, willing to risk her own life to protect her only child, so with a boundless heart, cherish all living beings as your children. Suffuse the whole world with unobstructed loving-kindness.

So with your eyes closed, the beautiful instructions in metta are to look toward whatever most naturally awakens your heart. Think of someone that you love and care about, someone who is not too complicated or conflicted, where there is just an easy, natural outpouring of love. Remember them or picture them. It can be a person you care about. It could even be your dog—"Oh, you're home! How great!"

Picture this being who looks at you with the eyes of love. It's like what we said about Ram Dass, looking at everyone, loving everyone. And because that love is naturally there for you as you remember them, you can offer a kind of well-wishing: May you be filled with loving-kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well in body and mind, strong, healed. And may you be happy.

While it can feel mechanical at first, feel how these intentions can gradually soften the heart and open the channel of love. You picture this person. May you be filled with loving-kindness—how you care for them. May you be safe and protected. May you be well and strong, body and mind. And may you be happy, wishing their happiness.

Feeling the love that you have for them now, imagine that they could gaze back at you with the same care you offer them. They look at you with loving eyes and they say: May you too be filled with loving-kindness. May you too be safe and protected. May you too be well, healed, strong. They gaze at you so kindly: And may you too be happy.

We can be so loyal to our suffering. They say, "No, no—may you be happy." And you take it in. If you like, you can even put your hand on your heart. May I, as they wish for me, may I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be safe and protected. May I be well and healed. And may I be happy. Allow yourself to be happy. "Live in joy," says the Buddha, "in this world."

And finally, let the spirit of loving-kindness spread across this room in your imagination, touching all those you have been breathing together with for this last hour, wishing them loving-kindness and safety and well-being. Let it stretch from this room like a lighthouse beacon across the bay area and out across the continents and the oceans and

the whole of the earth. Your noble heart, your heart of loving-kindness and care that you inhabit just now, offers your intentions, your wishes of well-being to beings everywhere, in all forms.

May beings everywhere be held in this great loving-kindness. May beings everywhere be safe and protected. May beings everywhere be well and healed. And may beings everywhere be free.

Know that you can practice and carry this spirit of loving-kindness like a lighthouse or a beacon. You can be the leader in your own family or community, with those you share life with—generosity and integrity and love. This is given to you. It is what is possible for you, O nobly born. Remember this. Carry it with you.

It's dark and crowded out there, so be kind with that. And those who can, please help put the chairs away.

So much appreciation.

CHAPTER 70

Attachment, Commitment and Love

Jack Kornfield · 53 min

> *In this springtime reflection, Jack Kornfield illuminates one of Buddhism's most misunderstood teachings: non-attachment. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that suffering arises from clinging, he carefully distinguishes between unhealthy attachment—the grasping, controlling quality we feel viscerally in our bodies—and healthy dedication, commitment, and care. While Western psychology values secure attachment in relationships, the Buddhist understanding of non-attachment points to something different: being fully present without needing to control outcomes.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together stories and teachings to illustrate how we can engage wholeheartedly with life while releasing our grip on results. He shares a powerful account of peacemaking work at the Israeli-Palestinian border, where a moment of genuine human connection transformed a rigid situation. He recounts Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche's trail ride with his horse Rocky, demonstrating that non-attachment doesn't mean withdrawing—it means showing up fully while trusting the process. The Buddha's teaching of the five rivers (sensation, feeling, perception, thought, and consciousness) reveals that liberation isn't about stopping these streams, but simply not identifying with them or taking them personally.*
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> *The practical wisdom here is profound: we are invited to act beautifully without attachment to outcomes, to plant seeds of goodness knowing the fruit will come in its own time. Quoting Thomas Merton's advice to activists and Rilke's contemplation on attention, Kornfield shows how loving awareness allows us to tend the garden of life with care rather than control. This teaching offers a path through difficult times—whether personal grief or collective challenges—by helping us find the inner balance and spaciousness that the world most needs from us.*

Let yourself sit and be comfortable. The teachings tonight are really a kind of contemplation or reflection for you to listen to. You don't have to remember anything. There's no quiz at the end, no grades. You can listen to see if it reminds you of something important, or in what way it might, and that's beautiful. And if some of it doesn't seem useful, just let it go. It's probably wrong. Who knows? My daughter thinks so. But you can listen as a meditation in that way.

I want to start by acknowledging that it's the Monday after Easter, and it's insanely wild spring out there from all that thankful March rain. Easter and Passover and all the various spring holidays with the eggs and the bunnies are really the ancient archetypal celebration of the renewal of life, of the fertility of life and the rebirth after a long winter. One of the questions is: how do you navigate death and rebirth? Because there's a way in which we're all dying and being reborn all the time.

I had the opportunity after a retreat recently to drive back into Woodacre—I now live in Fairfax—to the house which I had helped create and where I lived for thirty years. It was kind of wild looking at it. It's lovely; a young couple are there who are about to have kids, and it's the perfect place for that. We raised our daughter there. And I thought, wow, that was a life, wasn't it? And it's all gone. Actually, only a few people even remember what happened there and how it was created. And then that will be gone too. Things appear, we experience them, and they're gone. Like your childhood, for example. Or Tutankhamen, or the dinosaurs. Or Y2K, if you remember that. Or cassette tapes. Stuff happens and then it disappears. And what do we do with that?

It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, says the Buddha, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not. So that's some medicine there, isn't it? But this is our human incarnation—it is designed this way. This is our human lot. So how do we deal with this?

In Colorado, there is a woman who made a kind of ritual work of art that I talk about sometimes called the Salt Monument. She made a temple for it, and in the middle is a giant glass or lucite crystal that turns every twenty-four hours. It's filled with seven and a half billion crystals of salt, one for each human being on the earth. As the priestess of the Salt Monument, every evening she goes in and takes a beautiful ritual container and from the bottom of it pours out two hundred thousand grains of salt for the two hundred thousand people that died that day. Think about that—this day on earth. She says some prayers over it and does a kind of ritual return to the earth. Then every morning she comes in and pours in another ritual container of two hundred fifty thousand grains of salt for the two hundred fifty thousand babies that will be born that day.

That's us. We're coming and going, baby. That's just how it works.

Our practice of mindfulness and loving awareness gives us the capacity to be with birth and death and change—the inevitability of it—from the place of a witnessing loving awareness, a place of balance or wisdom. Now, it ain't that easy. We live in a time of toxic politics where there's a lot of fear and racism and terrorism. You look and you think, oh my gosh, what is happening? Worldwide terrorism, what's happening to the climate, what's happening in our politics, what's going to happen? That's on one side.

And then on the other side, there's a million acts of goodness every single day—gestures of care, the blooming trees of spring, the unbearable beauty of the earth—along with the suffering and the greed and the idiocy.

We could have a small vision about it. There was a guy, I think he was a Texas oilman—not to say anything about Texas, but maybe a little bit about the brashness of it—who was wealthy, and he went to Picasso's studio to buy a Picasso, because he could. While being shown around, he said to Picasso, "Why don't you paint things more like they are?" Imagine saying that to Picasso. And Picasso said, "What do you mean, the way they are?" The man said, "Well, like here," and he pulled out his wallet and showed a photograph of his wife. Picasso held it up and said, "Hmm, she's rather flat and small, isn't she?"

There's a way in which we can have a very rigid view of things and how they're supposed to be. That small sense of self—that we think we know what's real and how things are supposed to be—is very limited. But there's something bigger going on than our ideas about it. As I say so often, the question is not the future of humanity but the presence of eternity.

So there is an invitation in the meditation practice. The Buddha's texts begin, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of the awakened ones, remember who you are, remember your inherent dignity, your capacity for compassion. This is your birthright." Make room for this possibility.

Because here we are in this beautiful springtime, and there's something mysterious that's also true. There are some questions that can't be answered by Google: Who are we? How do we navigate this? What is this for?

There's a Zen story from third grade. Ruth remembers being a girl, daughter of a sharecropper in South Carolina, one of ten kids living in a little cabin. One day in spring, her third grade teacher said there would be a talent show. Little Ruth went home troubled, thinking, "What talent do I have?" She couldn't sleep that night and paced the porch before the field. Then the clouds parted and the moon, almost full, filled her face and turned the boards of the porch into blue and illuminated everything with its glorious moonlight. Her little mouth dropped open and she felt like there was something magic, and she was a part of it. When asked the next day, she said her talent was seeing the moon.

There's something that we're being asked to do: to see in a more timeless way, to live from that wisdom and that reality. And then as we open that space of seeing in a new way, with a kind of willingness and courage, we get what Zorba called the whole cata-

strophe. We get the magnificence of it and we get the ocean of tears. We get the beauty and we get the tragedy of it. This is human incarnation. Anybody not have that, by the way? Just checking.

So what do we do then? What we want is to wait for a kind of opening in it. Like that little girl on the porch, not knowing, and then she waited and—ah—now the moonlight comes in to show me something new. We allow ourselves to turn our attention and our hearts and our goodwill to this mystery of who am I. How do I navigate birth and death, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow? Am I always grasping at this and afraid of that? Or is there some more noble and wise way to move through all of this change?

But if you open, as Zorba says, to the catastrophe, not only is there the beauty of the moon in the spring, but you also open to the ocean of tears—your worries for the earth and what we're doing to it, your own personal grief and sadness for the losses you've had, the anger, the doubt about how to live in this world. Those too are vast. And it's not so easy.

Here's James Baldwin, such a magnificent writer and visionary. He says, "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word love here, not in a merely personal sense, but as a state of being or a state of grace, not in the infantile American sense of being made happy by stuff or someone"—that's quite a phrase, isn't it? Thank you, James—"but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and courage and growth."

It's a different meaning of love than the love of gratification.

It's the love of willingness to show up for this life fully. And that takes awareness and attention and courage and love.

And periodically you will die. I mean, yes, you're going to die anyway—that's right, we know that. We've got the statistics, and the mortuary is waiting for you, I promise you. They've got it all figured out. But you're going to have other deaths as you go along.

And the person who is really being on the way, writes the Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim, who falls upon hard times in the world, will not as a consequence turn to those friends who offer refuge and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening.

So spring comes, but it also comes after winter. And rebirth comes after death. That's the way it seems to work in this life. You have to let go of this to move into that. Or you have to go through the dark night to come to some other dimension of being. And it requires a deep trust.

Again, Pablo Neruda, that line I love, where he writes: "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's something so large that we are a part of—life, we are life—that no matter what we do as human beings, there's some bigger force, because we're a part of that, that's going to push the weeds and the grass through the cracks in the stone on the sidewalk. Tennessee Williams wrote, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's something about life that will renew itself—with you in some way, or without you. It just does. And you begin to trust it.

And then you see, all right, here's the toxic politics. You may have noticed that. H.L. Mencken, the great political commentator from the 1920s, wrote: "The whole aim of politics is to frighten and menace the populace with an endless series of hobgoblins, almost all exaggerated and unreal, as a way to gain power." Thank you for your analysis. Be afraid, be really afraid, and I am going to make it all better for you. The world won't be dangerous again because I'll take care of it all.

So what to do with it? Yes, vote. Yes, act in some way. But also turn off the damn news for a while. Gandhi took a day a week—in the middle of bringing down the British Empire—in silence, just to walk outside and listen to his heart and try to hear something more eternal than the battle he was in.

This is from Veronica Patterson, a poet. She writes:

"Say over and over again the names of things, the clean nouns: weeping birch, tanager, damask rose. Read field guides, atlases, gravestones. At the store, bless each apple by kind: Macintosh, Winesap, Delicious, Jonathan. Enunciate the vegetables and herbs: okra, cilantro, calendula. After a speech compromising the environment, recite the tough, silky structure of spider webs—ladder web, mesh web, funnel. Chant the spiders: comb-footed, round-headed, garden cross, feather-legged, ogre-faced. Remember that most short verbs are ethical: hatch, grow, spin, trap, eat. Dig deep, pronounce clearly, pull the words in over your head, and hole up until it's time to hatch."

Something like that. Her advice is not to get too engaged in it. I'm not saying whether you should or not, because there is also a responsibility, and I'm not trying to say there isn't something that really needs our attention. But there's a way in which you can get

wound up in that and forget the vastness of it, forget what really matters. And it is scary, because sometimes it's a train wreck, and there's a lot of collateral damage to thousands and millions of human lives. So it is something we have to pay attention to.

But we also have to listen in a new way for an opening—listen without so much being in the middle of it, without attachment to it—and say, "Well, wow, yes, I could read Machiavelli and Sun Tzu as well, because they're sort of describing what's happening strategically. This is interesting. This is how human beings are trying to solve problems, and some of it is really messed up, but it's not a new thing. We're actually part of this. This is how humanity does it." Step back a bit and say, "What can I do? What can make a difference?"

I received a story that was sent to me today. I'd spent some time in Israel and Palestine, visiting and giving some teachings, and also meeting with various peacemaking groups. One of the things that's most both heartbreaking and important about what I saw there is that what you get in the news is all the conflict—the suicide bombings, the shootings of Palestinian youth, all of those kind of things. That's what makes the news. But there are two hundred groups doing amazing cross-border peace connection work. The people who were replanting olive groves. I met with the Former Combatants for Peace, and the grieving, bereaved mothers from both sides, and the teenage Palestinian and Israeli groups that are coming together. There are hundreds of those as well, groups of goodwill that never make the news.

So this is a story of a group that was doing peacemaking work on both sides. It was a group of Israelis and Americans who went over to do some peacemaking work, first in Israel and then into Palestine. They were coming back and bringing a Palestinian man with them for another group meeting in Israel. They came up to the gate, and he had been lucky—somehow the computer missed that he was an activist in some way, so he got a permit to cross the border. They all went up in their little bus, and they had a special meeting coming up.

The soldier who was there, a young woman with a machine gun, said to the Palestinian, "Your permit—you have to go through that other gate. This is not for Palestinians. It's an hour away. You've got to get there, and maybe they'll let you through." She was very curt, just doing the soldier thing. "You're not allowed," and so forth.

The woman telling this story said, "I looked at this young woman in her uniform with her machine gun, and she was very stern. But every time she spoke, she also had her hair pulled back—this long black hair, tied up a little bit. And she'd flop her head, and her voice was saying no, no, no, but her hair was saying something different."

"I didn't judge her. I just saw she was in a difficult situation, and she was a human being. I just looked at her, this older woman, and I said, 'I know it's complicated. Is there any way you can find a way to help us? We have to join our friends in the South. We have to do it fast. This is a group, and this man is really part of it. We can't leave without him. Is there some way?'"

She paused for a minute and put her gun to the side. She moved toward a bunch of keys and said, "You see that gate? If he crosses it quickly and calmly, he can walk five minutes and take a taxi to this other place—five minutes, you can meet him, and it'll be all right."

"I saw the opening, and I honored her, and we responded. She got a little bit calmer. We talked a little bit about how hard it was. I asked her, 'How is it to be a soldier?' She said, 'It's terrible. I go home and I don't smile all week. And now I'm supposed to be happy when I go home to see my mother?'"

"I looked at this dark, slender young girl in front of me, young enough to be my daughter, and I became so curious. I wanted to ask her about her hair. What's the story? I was convinced that this hair had its own language, so I did."

"She said, 'It's a reminder that I am a woman. That I'm born into life to love. I tend to forget this in the uniform, and I've forgotten how to smile with so much suffering around. But then my hair slaps my face, it blows, and reminds me I'm a woman. No one can bury this fact under any kind of uniform. When I'm out of here, I will work for peace like you.'"

Now she was speaking the same language as her hair, and her hair was soft and calm.

So there's something in these troubled times in which you're asked not to take the conflict into yourself, but to step back and sense the play of life, and then look for your opening. Because it will be there—with another person, or in a political way, or just in the human-to-human way.

Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see. This is from Mark Twain.

You can feel the power in his very simple words.

So then the question is, all right, how do we do this? We wait for these moments, these openings. We keep a bigger perspective. And the way to do it is without attachment.

This is really important. Let me talk about attachment for a bit, because all those spiritual books you read say you shouldn't be attached. And you think, what the hell does that mean? Really? Does it mean you have to throw away your family and your clothes and your car and your music and become a monk or a nun, not attached to your bowl and your robes and whatever happens? There doesn't seem to be any monk or nun material out here—maybe a few—but it's got to mean something more than that. And there were tens of thousands of awakened disciples of the Buddha who weren't monks and nuns. So what does it mean?

Well, one thing about the word that's important is that it has very different meanings in Western psychology and in Eastern psychology. In Western psychology, attachment is healthy. You want secure attachment between a mother or primary caregiver and their child, their baby especially. If there's a kind of attention and care and attunement—good enough, good enough—then that child realizes they belong here. They internalize this sense of being seen and loved, and they feel like they're part of the human race. But if there's not that secure attachment, then you get different things called insecure attachment or avoidant attachment, where they can't really make healthy relationships because they're not even connected to themselves. There's all kinds of trauma in that. We all know that in Western psychology, all the healing necessary.

So for the West, a psychologist talks about the health of attachment. It gets confusing because when you talk about non-attachment in the East, does it mean a mother shouldn't be attached to her baby? Does it mean a partner shouldn't be attached to their lover? That you shouldn't care about things?

You need to start paying attention to what it means when I say how to do this, to do it without attachment. What could that mean? And the way you get to know about it is you feel it in your body. This is not some philosophical thing I'm talking about.

There you are in a little conflict with your kids, which could happen, or a little conflict with your parents, or a little conflict with someone you love. Families are the best petri dish for all this stuff, but there are also people you work with and things like that. And your kids don't like it when you try to control them. Control and attachment are a little bit close together, you'll probably notice. It's one thing to foster them, but when you try to control them, when you're attached to how they're supposed to be, how do they feel? They hate it and they let you know it, or else they get really pouty or go inward or neurotic, whatever they do with it. But it doesn't work very well. Neither does it work with your lovers, quite honestly. "I want you to be this way for me," and "You should..."—how does that fly? Or your colleagues, and so forth.

You actually can start to feel it in your body, the difference between love, when you love somebody, and attachment, when you need them to be a certain way. They feel very different. One is clinging and holding on, and you can feel it viscerally in your gut, in your muscles, in your nervous system. You know what I'm talking about. And so non-attachment doesn't mean not relating, but it means to be present without the grasping, without the controlling. It's not in your control anyway—we'll get to that.

My teacher Ajahn Chah used to wander around the monastery. He also had a good sense of humor, and he would kind of tootle up to people, especially if it looked like they were having a hard time, and he'd say, "Are you suffering?" If they said no, he'd say, "Great! Have a beautiful day, lovely spring day, nice to see you." And if they said yes, he'd just look and say, "Ah, must be attached." Then smile and tootle off again.

It was like that—directly related. You're suffering. Not your pain, because you'll have pain. Not your loss, that's part of joy and sorrow. All that stuff comes with being human, with incarnation.

But your suffering is directly related to how attached you are. That's worth a pause.

Then he would say, all right. He used to talk about letting go. He said, if you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll be a lot happy. If you really let go, you'll be truly happy.

But there's something else to say about that, which is that sometimes we translate letting go as getting rid of. "Oh, I'm afraid. I want to let go of that fear and not have it come anymore." That's not letting go. That's aversion. "I don't want that." So sometimes the translation for letting go is better rendered as letting be—just letting it be the way it is without trying to control it. Sometimes you can let stuff go, but sometimes it's there and it's with you, and you say, okay, let it be. But you don't identify with it. You don't take it personally. You don't hold on to it.

Even this wonderful guru I spent time with in India, Nisargadatta—somebody asked him, "Here you are, you talk about mind vast like space and not being identified with the body and mind. You're this great saint, this sage. Do you ever get angry? Do you ever get upset?" He said, "Oh, sometimes, you know, if I'm really hungry and my food doesn't come on time and it's not there, I can get irritated, I can get annoyed." He said, "But it has nothing to do with me. It's just my body doing its thing." He said, "It's like it's there, but who I am is so much bigger than that. It just plays through." I didn't talk to his wife, so we don't know.

But then you say, all right, if I'm not attached, then what about marriage? What about relationship? What about family? What about social justice? What about care for the things in the world that matter if you're not attached? Isn't that sort of that Buddhist navel-gazing—everything is impermanent and I just let it come and go?

How do you operate then without attachment? There's a different frequency, a different capacity than control and attachment. And here are some words that describe it: dedication, commitment, direction, care. So instead of attachment in a love relationship—instead of "I need you to be a certain way" and controlling—it's "I'm dedicated to this. I tend and care, and I want you to flower as best you can. I want the best for you, as best I can, and for myself." It's not clinging but dedication. You're dedicated to your children. You're dedicated to the work that you do to change the world, or to bring something beautiful as an artist or a parent or in conscious business. It takes dedication, it takes commitment, and it takes direction. It can even take a kind of ambition—but a wise ambition. And what does that mean? It means that you're there, but you're not in that controlling place with it.

It also means that even though you're not attached, you show up. Because a lot of spiritual practice is really about whether you're avoiding relationship, whether you're avoiding actually being present for life with its pain and its beauty. And to become noble, dignified—all those lovely qualities that come from meditation where you practice this with all that comes up in your life—it requires somehow that you're willing to be present for it, not to turn your gaze away.

I told this story last month, the month before, but I've been telling it just because it's fun. The son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who's a lama teaching a lot in America, is also a great horseman. Their family is. He'd lived for a while in Boulder, Colorado, and his favorite horse, Rocky, was a horse he used for dressage and in the ring, and sometimes would just gallop out on the plains. But he decided to take Rocky on a trail ride with some other people, way up high—eleven thousand feet in the mountains. Rocky wasn't a trail horse.

Trail horses know how to turn around and back up, but Rocky hadn't done that. And they went along this trail that got very narrow, with a thousand-foot drop-off on one side, a big cliff on the other, and some scree. It was not an easy trail.

When they got to the hard part, they paused. Rinpoche, the young lama, looked down and thought, "Man, if Rocky slips even a little bit, I'm a goner." And then he thought, "Maybe I should just shift over a little to the upside, so if he slips I can sort of jump off the saddle and maybe I won't go down with him."

So he moved his weight a little bit to that side before going on the trail—and Rocky stopped at that second, turned his head around, and looked at him like, "Dude, I thought we were in this together."

And then the lama, the young lama, centered himself back on the saddle. "Okay, we're in it. We're in it together." He relaxed, and Rocky relaxed, and then step by step they went across that trail.

So to not be attached doesn't mean that you're not present. You're present—but in a different way. And the secret is to act well without attachment to the outcome. Because that part is not given to you. How your child is going to turn out, whether your business will succeed or not, your art project, the social justice thing that you do—whatever it happens to be.

I read probably every few talks this passage from Thomas Merton, writing to a young activist who was discouraged: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not perhaps bring about its opposite. As you understand this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself."

And in that way, what you're doing is beginning to trust that you face the right direction, you plant the seeds of something that really matters to you, and eventually somehow that will bear fruit. That's not up to you—when the plant grows. You water it and you tend it, but what's given to you in this human incarnation is to act beautifully. And then the world will receive that, and it will bear fruit in its own time.

There's a sense, as you do this in non-attachment, of the emptiness of it, if you will. Like going to my house of thirty years and realizing there are only a handful of people who have any memory of how it was built and what we did. And then that will be gone too. It's just like a whole life—that part of thirty years of life disappeared. Things are that way. They're empty because they exist for a time and then they're gone. So what you get to do is tend them and make beautiful things that add to the long term. Now it's a beautiful home for somebody else to raise their children in. But it's mysterious. It's not yours to possess. It just isn't.

It's a little bit like the serenity prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Somehow there's something very similar in this. And there's a kind of trust that you listen for that opening—like the swish of that Palestinian young woman's hair—and realize, "Okay, she's saying no, but her hair is indicating there's somebody else

under that machine gun in that soldier's uniform." And you wait, and you see. And you feel it in your body. You can tell when you're possessed and clinging. The people around you know it very well. And you suffer.

Ajahn Chah would say, "Oh, must be attached!" And then you realize, "Oh, maybe I could let it go a little bit."

Now, I just had the pleasure of doing a retreat myself for part of this March month-long retreat.

I sat for almost three weeks. Part of the time it was very quiet—I got concentrated and dissolved my body into light, samadhi experiences and such. But part of the time my mind was really busy, much more than I would have liked.

Right before I went on my retreat, in the week and days before, I got a whole bunch of emails from places where I often teach saying, "We're making our 2017 calendar." Here we are talking about living in the moment, and I am scheduled into 2018. It's insane. But they need to know because they'll save a space or they won't, and you've got to respond right away—from Kripalu and Omega and Esalen and wherever it happens to be. Then I'm planning things in China, and they want to do something in India. So I've got all this material swirling around.

And I'm sitting there trying to be quiet, knowing all those things have to be answered. I'm also worried because a few days before I sat, one of my best friends fell and broke her hip and is in the hospital. And another person I was tending to, whose teenage daughter is really going through a hard time. My mind is just going: "You have to take care of this. You have to fit it all together. You have to do it right away when you get out, because otherwise 2017 will be a mess. And you've got to do it in a sane way. Not do too much." And so on.

I keep saying, "Later, later," but my mind doesn't listen. Then I go, "Okay, samadhi," and I enter this deep, quiet place. But the minute I stop concentrating, it all rushes back in. I find that unpleasant because I just want to be quiet.

But after a while of this, I thought, well, maybe what I have to do is write down all these things I'm worried about or thinking I have to tend to. In five minutes, I wrote down forty-five things. Who I have to call, this email, that arrangement with China, those people in India, this thing with the Dalai Lama if I'm lucky, this person in the hospital I need to tend to. If I'd taken ten minutes, I'm sure I could have written down forty-five more.

But I wrote them down, and then I looked at the list and thought: *Thank you.* Thank you to my mind. I said, "You're trying to take care of all this business. I'm having a retreat and you're trying to take care of all this stuff and take care of me." I just kind of bowed to it instead of judging it. I said, "Thank you for doing all that. My God, you're taking care of a lot of business." And it just relaxed me a little bit. There wasn't quite that little controlling thing happening anymore.

Where's that poem from Kabir? I love it. The Indian mystic. He says: "Friends, please tell me what I can do about this world that I hold on to and it keeps spinning me out. I gave up my sewn clothes and wore a robe, but I noticed one day how well woven was the cloth. So I bought some burlap, but I still throw it elegantly over my left shoulder. I pull back my sexual longings, and now I discover that I'm angry a lot. I gave up rage, and now I notice that I'm greedy all day. I worked hard at dissolving the greed, and now I'm proud of myself. When the mind wants to break its links with the world, it still holds on to something, doesn't it?"

And so it's just its nature.

The Buddha described our human incarnation, our human lot, as being a river. He actually said it's five rivers: a river of sense experience, a river of feelings—all these feelings. I have a list of five hundred feelings that I compiled in the days before Google. You can look it up. It starts with the A's: angry and antsy and ambivalent and affectionate and amorous and apoplectic. And it just goes on and on.

Then you go to the B's: bored, bonkers, brokenhearted, blissed out. So there's a river of feelings—you know that river. There's a river of sensations. There's a river of perceptions: this is a man, this is a woman, this is a room. There's a way that we've been entrained to perceive the world and organize it, and so we have moment-to-moment perception of things. There is a river of thoughts. And anybody who has sat in meditation for, let's say, thirty seconds—oh my gosh, the first insight is the waterfall of thoughts. And the point isn't to stop it. The mind secretes thoughts like the endocrine gland secretes hormones. It just does.

And then there's the river of consciousness. The difference between someone who is liberated or awake, says the Buddha, and an ordinary person, is that an ordinary person has these five rivers—the river of sense experience, the river of all the changing feelings, the river of changing perceptions, the river of changing thoughts, the river of changing consciousness. And the one who is liberated has the same five rivers, only they don't cling to them. That's all. They're not identified. They don't take it personally. That's all. That's the definition of freedom.

So freedom comes through this training that we're doing of loving awareness, where you notice the feelings, you notice the thoughts, and you say, "Oh yeah, thank you for helping me," whatever—and you don't take them so personally. This is sadness, and this is grief, and this is joy, and it's part of our human lot, and you don't identify as much, particularly with the thoughts. As one great Lama said, "The mind creates both samsara and nirvana, yet there's nothing much to it. It's just made of thoughts. When we realize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us."

And so you start to see that thoughts are ephemeral, they're like clouds. And not only that—you can have an opinion about a person, or about politics, or about whatever it is, and then you can have the opposite thought three days or three years later. "Oh yeah, but my thoughts are really important, real." Well, good luck with that.

So the difference is to not grasp and to not identify and to not take it so personally, which is part of what you learn as you sit. It doesn't really matter what happens when you sit here. Your body hurts, your body is pleasant and at ease, your mind quiets, your mind is full of plans or storms, your emotions come, your emotions go. Someone says one sitting is better than another. Not really. The question is: can you find the place of balance and loving awareness that can allow your humanity to rise and fall like waves of the ocean? Can you become the space of balance and understanding and compassion for all of it?

And the point isn't that it's supposed to be a grim duty. As I say, the point isn't to perfect yourself. You've tried that for a long time—see how far you got? "Okay, I did my therapy, I went to the gym, I did a diet." How much did that work? I mean, those things are all fine, but the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's really to perfect this capacity to love, to perfect your love for this human life that each one has been given.

And then when you do, you can go back into the world, so to speak, from the sitting or from the temple. And you tend it with care, not with grasping. "Like a garland of beautiful flowers," says the Buddha, "make of your life a garland of beautiful deeds." This is the garden of the world, and you weed it and you fertilize it and you give it water and you tend it as best you can and you plant seeds moment to moment. And those seeds, even if they're not bearing fruit when you're there—the beautiful thing about a seed is it's miraculous. Sometime or other, it's going to make a difference.

And do you know why that is? Because it's all interconnected. Not just the butterfly wing in South America that changes all the weather patterns—in fact, it is interconnected. And so the seeds that you plant ripple out to the people around you, the things that you touch, the ones that they touch, and the ones that the others touch, and the envir-

onment that everyone moves through. It can't not affect the world. That's the beautiful thing. You get a chance to do something to the world with the way you drive or eat or speak or create or build or whatever it is that you do, or parent.

And so you plant these beautiful seeds, but you do it from a place of openness. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker—a big church, you know, and the billboard in front said, "Follow God on Twitter."

So that's about where we are in this age. You remember your Buddha nature and mystery, and you also remember that April 15th you owe your taxes. You have your Buddha nature and your social security number, and both are to be tended to with the same care.

This is from the poet Rilke: "In order for a thing to speak to you, you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists." Georgia O'Keeffe, who did those extraordinary paintings of desert flowers, was very straightforward about it. She said the reason she painted that way was so that people would actually see the flower, because it's so small in the desert. She wanted them to get it, to really look at it.

In order for a thing to speak to you, says Rilke, you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists. And through your laborious and exclusive love, the one and only phenomenon is now placed at the center of the universe. And in that incomparable place on that day, it is attended by angels.

There's something so important about being able to give attention fully to your own breath, your feelings, the body—the unique body that is one and only in the whole galaxy. There's never been someone like you over all of infinite time. Isn't that wild? And so you look: wow, look at this one, and look at that flower, and that one. You're there with it, tending and caring with respect. And that's a wild one, and that's a kind of mean one—they're out there, I assure you. And that's a loving one. You see all the flowers, and then you see which ones you want to water.

There is something about being able to be in this world with a sense of spaciousness and mystery, an inner balance of loving awareness that's really who you are. Then you can allow the changes and the cycles that make up every human life. Winter and spring, birth and death happen all the time. With a gracious heart, you become wise.

And that is really what the world needs. If it needs anything from you, it needs your wisdom and your compassion, your love. I think that's really why doing the practices that we do is important—because they teach us how to do that.

O nobly born, say the Buddhist texts, remember what is possible for you. Remember that within you is the great heart of compassion. Within you is the wisdom, and who you really are is awareness itself—this timeless loving awareness. Trust it. Rest in it. It is your own true nature. It is home.

CHAPTER 71

Monday Night Meditation Class with Jack Kornfield and Mark Coleman

Jack Kornfield · 1h10

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Jack Kornfield and Mark Coleman reflect on the nature of impermanence as Spirit Rock prepares to leave its meditation hall of 25 years. The evening weaves together themes of birth, death, and transformation, honoring both the Buddhist celebration of Vesākha and a recent memorial for beloved teacher Stephen Levine.*
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> *Jack shares moving stories about sitting with the dying and the mystery of consciousness, drawing on Stephen Levine's teaching that the bodhisattva's work is to go to the most painful places while keeping the heart open. The teachers explore the traditional Pāli chant on impermanence—'All things are impermanent, they arise and they pass away. To live in harmony with this truth brings great happiness'—and discuss how grief and letting go are both essential parts of practice. Jack reflects on Ajahn Chah's teaching that death and birth happen every moment, offering a gateway to freedom right here and now.*
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> *Mark Coleman invites practitioners to examine their relationship with endings and beginnings, reading from John O'Donohue's Celtic wisdom on how 'beneath time there is eternal depth.' The talk addresses the shift of identity that meditation cultivates—from being caught in the body, thoughts, and personality to resting in what Jack calls 'the one who knows' or loving awareness itself. This timeless awareness, they suggest, is our true home, allowing us to hold life intimately while also letting go when the time comes.*

So for this evening, our theme, partly because it's appropriate to the ending of the era in this building, in the holy trailers as we call it, and for other reasons including the memorial that we had yesterday for Stephen Levine here for some hundreds of people. As Mark has said, we want to talk about beginnings and endings, birth and death. Little things like that. We're going to do a bit of tag team. I'll teach for a bit and then Mark will, then come back to me and we'll see where we go.

One of the things that's so important about taking time to sit in meditation or walk in a mindful way, to have some form of practice that brings us back to where we are, is that we can get so lost in the speed and the complexity, the rush of our lives and all the things that we have to check off to get done, to get through the day—survival things and other things like that—that we lose a sense of connection to ourself and somehow to the beauty and the mystery of life on earth. We get small, if you understand what I mean.

This is a letter that was written to the Sun Magazine, one of my favorite journals. Some decades ago, this person writes:

"I started a rigorous six-year academic program in Boston that required me to work during the day, take classes every night, and do homework on the weekends. On my first summer off, I wanted to get far away from my studies and work with my hands and be close to the earth. So I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me and I decided to do it again the next summer.

That year, a good friend had recently died. I drove from Boston to Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend, and what was normally a six-hour trip took more than ten hours. By the time I arrived just before dusk, I was full of feelings—anxious and exhausted and maybe tearful.

My Amish hosts had delayed their dinner for me. During the meal, I tried to act natural, but I felt full of nerves and feelings, and my Amish host could clearly tell something was amiss, because at the end of dinner, he said, 'Come with me.'

I followed him to their backyard, which bordered an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gamboled about while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa. I did the same.

The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. The sky was peach at the horizon and deep blue higher up. Stars had begun to appear. Then out of the alfalfa rose fireflies, a few at first, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars, heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. I felt my anxiety leave me. The farmer turned and said, 'That's for you.'"

It's both touching, as you can hear, and it's also a reminder somehow of what it means to live in the mystery of things. We all know that old Ojibwe saying: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

To come and sit in meditation or to sit at home and have a practice—yes, there is release of stress, and yes, there's an inner regulation and all the great things that modern neuroscience says. But there's something else about letting the heart be tender and the senses open and somehow feeling your place on the earth again and how important that is. Your place in the turning cosmos of birth and death and all that we live with.

This past weekend, yesterday, we had a memorial service for Stephen Levine, who was a close friend and meditation teacher and author of many books, a hospice worker. Many books: *Who Dies?* and *Healing into Life and Death* and *Gradual Awakening*. I've known him for probably forty years, and he published my first book and Joseph Goldstein's first book with his press. He had a press in Haight-Ashbury. He was part of the founding of the Oracle magazine in those days, in the old hippie days. In fact, Wavy Gravy, who was supposed to come yesterday, couldn't because he had his own big 80th birthday celebration, so he sent a little red nose and a haiku and said, "Stephen was my oldest friend. We went to elementary school in Albany, New York. I remember him from second grade." It was very sweet.

For those of you who knew Stephen and Andrea, who also came—his widow, I guess you would say, his partner—and Noah Levine, his son, who started the Dharma Punks and Against the Stream, spoke, and Ram Dass Skyped in. It was very moving, because people stood up and talked about how Stephen's presence and his invitation to people was to be compassionate and loving no matter what.

He worked, and Andrea too did, at the bedside of a thousand people who died, children who were dying, worked in children's hospitals. He worked with people who'd gone through severe abuse. And he would talk about it. He'd say the work of the bodhisattva, the being committed to compassion, is to go to the most painful places and keep their heart open.

I read a passage from just one conversation with Stephen, where he wrote as an example: A woman they worked with, her mother became very ill. She'd never really gotten along with her mother. Her mother had been judgmental, unkind, and actually severely abusive. When her mother became ill, she was the only one of the sisters who could even go and sit at her bedside because she'd been training in meditation. She would just sit next to her mother and wish her well. Not "why did you do this" or "why didn't you do that" or a total accounting, but just try to let her mother be and feel love for her.

Now, her mother had not only been nasty in her lifetime—it wasn't ending just because she was dying.

This woman, day after day, sat there sending loving kindness to her mother. And on the day her mother died, her mother looked at her and said, "I hope you roast in hell. I hope you have the worst possible life." This is really abusive and terrible—what you're not supposed to hear from your mother, seriously.

But obviously her mother... this doesn't happen by accident. Somebody taught her to do that, and it happened to her too. So the daughter was sitting with compassion for all that her mother had lived through. And her mother died cursing her, and she died with her daughter sitting next to her, looking at her with soft eyes, with an open heart and full of compassion, saying, "Mom, I hope everything's okay for you."

For her mom, it was terrible. Stephen goes on: but for her, it was wonderful. She was just another human being who was having a hard time as her mother was dying, and she was healing into love.

So that gives a little bit of the flavor of Stephen's presence and his teaching, and really what we're practicing for here. Yes, we're practicing to reduce stress and cultivate calm and focus and all kinds of beautiful things like that. But more than that, we too are going to be confronted in our lives with unexpected changes and with difficulty. As the Buddha said, there is suffering in union and incarnation. Anybody not have that? You can have your eight dollars back, right?

So there we were, Jai Uttal was singing some chants—kirtan chants, chants of transformation. It also happens that a couple of days ago was Vesak, which is in the Theravada Buddhist tradition that our insight meditation and mindfulness come from. It's the holiday that celebrates the enlightenment of the Buddha, his birth and his death. They rolled it all into one. Remember, there used to be a day for George Washington's birthday and Lincoln's birthday, and then they made President's Day? This is kind of like that—the Buddhist equivalent.

I got sent this little letter from the press secretary, a statement by Barack Obama: "Michelle and I extend our warmest wishes to Buddhists in the US and around the world in their celebration of Vesak, honoring the birth, enlightenment and passing of Buddha. During this season we reflect on the Buddha's universal teachings of peace, service and recognition of common humanity—shared values that also bind us all as Americans. This occasion gives us an opportunity to commemorate the many contributions of Buddhists to our progress globally and to recommit ourselves to building a bright future for all communities, cultures, and religions. Our family sends the best wishes during this season. Barack and Michelle Obama."

So there you go—a little greeting from them. But it's wild that it's birth, death, and enlightenment all on the same day. But it's true, because everything actually happens now. I think you may have noticed that. There's only now. And there's always birth and death.

And here we are in this hall. There were two other buildings—those who come regularly know—on this meadow that held some of our offices. And the day came when the offices were moved to the admin building. A giant truck crushing machine came in, picked them up, squashed them, and then carted them off to whatever landfill. If we were in some other part of the world, this would be a school for fifty more years, right? And all the rodents would be welcome. But it's kind of wild that it exists for a time and then it disappears. They were there and then crushed, gone, like they never existed.

I drove back past the house where I'd lived for thirty years in Woodacre. It was sold last year after the end of my marriage. My ex-wife lived there for some years and then we sold it. There's a new family there starting to have kids, and they repainted. But we built it and developed it and made the gardens and all of that. And I looked and I said, you know, only a few people even remember what happened in there. There were all these momentous things—beautiful things and visitors and arguments and child rearing. It's gone. And no one will even remember it when I don't remember it anymore. Maybe my daughter for a little bit, but that's it.

Things are like that. They come out of the world. They appear for a time. We get to engage in a way, and then they vanish.

which has had the Dalai Lama and 600 Tibetans crowded knee to knee to be with him, who came streaming from all over the West Coast to be with His Holiness. Or Thich Nhat Hanh, or the San Quentin Gospel Choir singing in here. So many baby blessings and an amazing number of teachings in this room.

My favorite night, I think, was twenty years ago or so—full moon, Halloween, and we had the Gyuto monks, those guys who do the chanting, you know, multivocal chanting. They came, and the abbot put his forehead against mine. I thought, "Oh God, I'm going to see light or something." It was very cool. And then we explained it was Halloween. And they said, "Oh, great!" And they went back to their van and pulled out these skeleton costumes. They said, "Come out in the meadow," and under the full moonlight with the cymbals and all the Tibetan chanting, they did this skeleton dance on Halloween for us. Just—you know, why not, right?

The phrase from James Joyce is "the ineluctable modality of the world of the senses," which is to say, as Mark was saying in the sitting, that the senses of sight and sound and smell and taste and thought and feeling—what makes up our human experience—ever in change, is arising and passing moment to moment. And we rest in the present while these waves of experience play in our senses.

Now, this from the Buddha: It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not.

And so really the big question is: how do you handle change? And I'm not asking it theoretically—how does one handle change? I'm asking you, and me, and Mark. What do we do with beginnings and ends of things? And how do we handle death? Because that's the strange thing. You can look at the few people around you, and in a few years, one of them won't be here. One of them will have died. Might be you. But it might be one of them. It's really wild.

We had somebody die on a retreat in Yucca Valley a few years ago. There we all were, sitting and meditating and talking about death and life and birth. And then that person died and they weren't there anymore. And it made it much more real.

But here's an interesting question. I'll say just a couple more things and then let Mark piggyback on this.

When the Buddha died, as the myth or the story handed down goes, on the Buddha's passing, flowers rained down from the trees and there was a great gathering and celebration of his life. There were two groups of his disciples. One group was weeping and grieving because they loved him and they would miss his presence—he must have had rather a remarkable presence. And another group was complaining about that former group, saying, "Didn't they get the teachings that all things are impermanent? This is what the guy had to say. What are they weeping about? This is the way things go." And those were supposed to be the more enlightened ones.

I'm not certain myself, because it's actually very human. It's this human incarnation that requires us to hold both—that in some way we're part of an ever-changing mystery, and to understand that and relax with change.

There's a beautiful Sufi dance that I've done in the Sufi tradition. The English version, where you meet partners and move in a circle, is: "I love it when it comes and I love it when it goes." And you do that over and over as people pass by—"I love you when you come and I love you when you go." And you start to feel what it's like to open your heart to both coming and going.

So in one way there's a very deep equanimity or peace to realize that all things arise and they pass away. And that is what it means to have a human incarnation. Nothing is fixed. And can you relax and become the loving awareness that knows this without being so frightened or clinging? Because if you're able to let go, your heart's much more at peace. You're freer.

But the other side is all that spiritual bypass where, "Okay, things come and go, doesn't matter."

And my friend Malidoma Somé, who came here—West African shaman and medicine man—said, "Your streets are full of the ungrieved dead in your culture. We in the Dagara people grieve every person consciously." And you have people who've died in the ICUs tended by staff, but not by their families or people who knew them. You have homeless people dying in the streets, people in old age homes. And I can feel it in a culture that doesn't know how to grieve.

And so there's something really honorable and beautiful about those who are weeping. Because we need our tears as well. Our grief and our tears are also our way of saying, "I have cared about this. This is part of my way of honoring it and letting it go." And to take your seat in the midst of birth and death and joy and sorrow—Ajahn Chah, my teacher, said, "If you haven't wept deeply, you haven't really meditated yet." Those tears are called the tears of the way. Those tears will come to you, as well as a sense of a kind of timelessness that says, yes, this is our human lot.

So there you have it. Thus have I heard.

So while you were all meditating, I was busy doing a little bit of calculus. I had the thought, "I wonder how many hours of meditation have happened within these four walls." I did my rough guesstimate—I know the program and the flow of numbers—and I figured somewhere between eight and ten million hours of meditation have been put in here by you all, and many others like you. That's a lot of hours. That's a lot of practice.

And many of you have probably spent—I'm actually curious, how many people have been coming here since 1990 or thereabouts? In the nineties? How many people have made it? And in the 2000s, early 2000s? The aughts? In the last five years?

So we've spent a lot of time within these walls. I'm a big nature lover, so for me to be in a low-ceilinged trailer in this beautiful land that's just gorgeous and dripping with exquisiteness—at times it has been challenging. But I also am aware that, as I was saying coming in here, it does feel like this place has arms. It's like sitting here, and there's a sense of being held, just as the Dharma holds us, community holds us, practice holds us, others hold us—but also a certain place holds us.

And as Jack was recalling different things that happened, I've also been reflecting on different memories—first coming here from England in the early nineties to practice, first teaching here around 2000, running many, many courses and classes and trainings and daylongs, being in long tedious board meetings and other kinds of meetings. Actually, the memory that stood out was that I did the first days of meditation and dance, where we wove in silence and stillness and movement—quite wild, passionate movement at times. The first time I did that daylong, I felt like the whole 2,500-year Theravada tradition kind of croaking, like, "No! What is happening to Buddhism in the West? It's really going downhill." Anyway, we didn't have a sprung floor, but because we have a trailer, it sort of bounced anyway, so it all worked out.

But as Jack was saying, these twenty-five years—or however many years you've been meditating, however many times you've practiced here, whatever's happened in the last twenty-five years—where is it all gone? Where is it now? I'm aware of the many, many hours, probably thousands of hours I've spent in here. And where is it? It's a complete dream. It's fondness, it's memories, it's a sense of place, but it's also gone. That ephemerality of life. And yet it also has some substance to it, and it does endure in our hearts and in our memories.

So I want to read something from John O'Donohue, who talks about how the Celts used to view time, and how place touches us. He says:

The nature of calendar time is linear. It is made up of durations that begin and end. The Celtic imagination always sensed that beneath time there was eternal depth. This offers us a completely different way of relating to time. It relieves time of the finality of ending. While something may come to an ending on the surface of time, its presence, meaning, and effect continues to be held into the eternal. This is how spirit unfolds and deepens. In this sense, eternal time is intimate. It is where the unfolding narrative of individual life is gathered and woven.

So although this place will come to dust and ashes, there's also a sense of enduring in some way—in some mysterious presence, quality, felt sense. I know when I come to the meadow, and the trailers have already gone, how many memories from the staff linger. There's a sense of something still present.

As we know, the Buddha spoke much to this teaching.

It was like the cornerstone of his teaching—to understand, to live with this felt, intuitive sense of transience, of holding life intimately and lightly.

And the poet Mary Oliver put it beautifully in a poem when she said:

In this life, there is one thing I have come to learn, that leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss, whose other side is salvation, whose meaning we will never know. To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones as if your own life depended on it, and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

So unlike the spiritual bypass—"Oh, things are impermanent, let's not get too connected and attached"—no, we connect intimately, viscerally with life. Because why? Because that's what life asks of us. To be here, to be present for the performance. It's beautiful and difficult and perplexing. To hold it against your bones as if your own life depended on it. And when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

That's the hard part. That's why we're here. That's why it's practice. Not easy to let go. There's a lot of talk about letting go. "Just let go of that grief, you know. Just let go of that person. Just let go of that difficult emotion." Well, good luck. You would if you could.

So I thought we could chant an age-old Buddhist chant. I'll chant it in Pali and then we'll chant it in English. It means: All things are impermanent. They arise and they pass away. To live in harmony with this truth brings great happiness.

That's an interesting punchline. To live in harmony with the fact that things are arising and ceasing brings great happiness. We might think, "Oh, that's a little depressing. It's all going to go. We're going to lose everything." It is if we want to cling to it, but if we can actually flow with that movement, there's relief, there's spaciousness, there's freedom.

The Buddha on this theme said it's better to spend one day contemplating beginnings and endings than to spend a whole hundred years living without contemplating that.

What does it mean to contemplate beginnings and endings? What is your relationship to the beginnings of things? We generally prefer the beginning, unless we have an anticipatory anxiety about what's going to happen. But it's the endings—the parting, the ceasing, the letting go, the dissolution—that we often find challenging. But as one friend, Roger Housden, said in his book *Ten Poems to Say Goodbye*: to say hello, we have to say goodbye. To say goodbye, we welcome the new. We can't say hello without saying goodbye.

So before we transition to this beautiful purpose-built, magnificent dharma hall that we'll be residing in hopefully for the next twenty-five years and many more after that—although many of us won't be around to see that—we might explore our relationship to endings. Like our relationship to this place. What do you notice comes up in relation-

ship to this dharma hall, which has a certain sacredness to it because of the intentionality and the dedication and the practice and the insights and the heart openings and the connections and the community that's been developed here? This is a home. I feel like having been a transplant from England and feeling a little homeless wherever I am, this is about as home as it gets for me in terms of regularity of place.

But at the same time, we honor what is and we honor what's passing, but not to also get stuck and not to build a shrine to it, as Hafiz says.

It's that line he says: "What do sad people have in common? It seems they've built a shrine to the past and often go there to do a strange wail in worship. What's the beginning of happiness? To stop being so religious like that."

So we're not carrying it around on our back, but we're just acknowledging, bowing, appreciating it, and also letting it go—like breeze through the fingers.

Marilyn Monroe, who I don't usually quote in my dharma talks, once said, "Sometimes things fall apart so that better things can fall together." Don't think she was talking about dharma centers, but...

Or as T.S. Eliot put it in a rather more astute way: "The end is where we start from."

So in beginnings there are endings; when there are endings, there are beginnings. Out of dissolution comes the arising of something else. The dissolution of the roof here—and you notice a very nice rain catchment structure trying to recycle water—it is truly the beginning of the end of this building, which can no longer hold out the water.

So take a moment: How are you with beginnings? What arises for you in that possibility, that openness, that space? And how does your heart hold and tend to the endings of things, the passing of things? Do we run? Do we flee? Do we pass over? Do we shut down? Do we put a nice spiritual wrapper around it?

Endings, beginnings, job changes, kids going off, illness—you enter what is it, the continent of illness when it happens, a different world—divorce, aging, moving from one place to another.

In a way, to sit in meditation is to step out of the movement of time. And the question is not the future of humanity but the presence of eternity. Is there some way that we can sit in this mystery of our life and find that which is timeless amidst all of these changes? Then we become that kind of freedom that the Buddha spoke of. Then we really find a place of freedom in ourselves.

And it's not so easy. We miss the things that go. We do need to grieve.

Another poem, called "The Dog Misses You":

The dog goes out to look for you.
She circumnavigates the yard.
She's been practicing saying "I love you" in every language—
the dog practices saying in Javanese,
the dog practices saying in Romanian.
The dog digs a hole along the fence.
She's so funny when she digs, all that dirt flying.
The fence could be time.
There's surely a different world on the other side of it.
Are you over there?
In the afternoon, the dog pulls the leash so hard she almost lifts off the ground,
but you aren't to be found.
Later at night, the dog puts her blocky head upon the kitchen floor and sleeps,
one soft and floppy ear pressed to the linoleum, listening.
The dog has been practicing saying "I'm lost" in every language—
the dog practices saying in Hmong,
the dog practices saying in Esperanto.
The dog has three wishes.
She wishes she knew where to find you.
She wishes you would come home with a treat.
She wishes you and I were together on the bed, and up she would jump.

It's beautiful and so tender, and it's also so mysterious—because the mystery is that this person was here and then they're not. And that is also the mystery that will happen to all of us. We can be committed and dedicated; we can love and hold this world against our bones, as Mary Oliver says, and then let it go.

It takes both. You have to remember the value of this human life and use it beautifully. And at the same time, remember something that's more eternal. Or you won't be at ease. You have to remember your Buddha nature and your zip code, basically, and live afoot in each world.

our practice and teaching also offers—as you said, with your breath changing and with a million thoughts coming and going, your emotions of loving and hating—you have everything in there. You've got the zoo in there, right? And there comes a place where you begin to find a respite in awareness itself, in loving awareness that's not

caught by each of these different seductive, judgmental plots and plans and ideas. You can choose the ones that are valuable, but somehow you find the spaciousness of loving awareness, which is your home.

Karlfried Dürckheim, Zen teacher, writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to that friend who offers them refuge and comfort and encourages their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themself over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found in them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

And so there is something about going through loss or letting go or going through hard times that actually calls for you to turn yourself somewhere—to that which is not changing, which is timeless or indestructible.

Now, sitting as Stephen and Andrea have done with thousands of people, sitting at the bedside of people as I've done, people come and ask, "Okay, you're in the spiritual industry, basically. What happens when you die? What do you really know?" And of course, it is a mystery. I've watched people ask the Dalai Lama, and he smiles and says, "I will be very excited to find out."

I didn't used to believe in anything when I went to be with my teacher Ajahn Chah. I came from a family of scientists. And I said, "I don't know about past and future lives and rebirth and all this other stuff. Do I have to believe that?" He said, "No, no. Death and birth happen every day, every moment. And you can learn all the Dharma that you need, all the teachings of both how we make ourselves lost and unhappy in this world with greed and hatred and fear, the forces that create human suffering. And in every birth and death you can also find letting go, ease, mindfulness, compassion. You can find the gateway to freedom there, here."

So I started not believing in anything. As it's gone along, I've come to more or less the other side, and I pretty much believe in everything now. Sitting at the bedside of people who are dying, that mysterious moment when they're there as a person, and then absolutely silently, like a falling star at night, spirit leaves the body. And it's just meat then—it's not them. What is that consciousness? What is that spirit? Or sitting with someone who leaves partly and then comes back and says, "I was in this realm of light." Or "I was talking to someone." And you say, "Oh, you know, the materialists say that was just delusion, right?"

A hospice director, a friend of mine, had a group of people come to see him. Their father was dying. He was in his eighties, an old Italian guy. And they came and said, "We don't know what to do." They were in their fifties. "Our father's really close to death, as you know. And his younger brother was killed in a car accident yesterday. And we don't know whether we should tell him—and that would disturb his dying process—or not tell him." And the hospice director said, "Well, I don't know. Let's just go and see how he is."

So they all walked in the room and stood with him. "How are you doing, Dad?" "Okay." And pretty far gone. And then he raised his head and said, "Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "My brother who died." "How do you know?" "Oh, I've been talking to him all night."

So there is another possibility. I remember sitting and holding my father's hand. And he's saying, "I'm just going to turn into dirt. I'm a scientist. I know dirt when I see it." Whatever. And I said, "Maybe, but you might find yourself leaving your body and the spirit going into light or love or having experiences."

You're not your body. He said, I'm not? I said, listen, most everybody in the world actually, if you look around, believes that there's something more than this. So I don't know, but you're a scientist, so you have to be open-minded, right? And when you die, as even the light comes and you leave, you remember—I told you so.

I've done past life regressions with people around the world at different times. I'll play with this stuff. And the remarkable thing is, if I have a room of people, it doesn't matter whether I'm in Palestine or Israel or Burma or Japan—half of them don't believe in this stuff, which is totally fine. But when we do a past life regression, the majority of people have some memory if you do it well. And the interesting thing is it has no connection with whether they believe or not. Somebody who doesn't believe at all, they look and they say, oh my God, I have sandals on my feet and they're a little muddy and I'm this woman or man. And it's not Queen Cleopatra, I assure you. It was like a farmer in the Middle East or Africa or something like that. And then if we progress it forward—how did you die, and what was the space like after you died—people have all these memories of that. Wherever I do this, people have similar experiences to report: I left my body, there was light, there was some sense of not being physical but still having consciousness. You can believe what you want, it's up to you. Unless—you'll see. Remember, I told you.

But the big thing about this is that there is a possibility, and it's part of what meditation really teaches us—a shift of identity. You take your seat with some dignity. The Buddhist texts begin, "O nobly born." They see the nobility and the dignity in every

single human being. That's kind of the invitation: come and be reminded of your fundamental dignity and nobility. Be reminded of your Buddha nature, of who you really are, which is not this body. It's not your personality, I hope. Really, I do.

I mean, you have this weird animal body. Do you think that's who you are? Little wiggly things and fur in certain places. Come on. You're inhabited. And all the fantastic suffering and horrible confusion because of racism and tribalism—we see people as if that's who they are, their color or their shape or something like that. You're a blue person. I don't like blue people. Only purple people or whatever it is. It's crazy.

So we identify with our life, the people we love—it's quite natural. Our tribe, our community. We identify with our body. You need to take care of it. You need to love it. But it just isn't who you are. You rent it. Avis, right? And then you have to turn it back. Mileage is up, okay, time to turn it in.

And the beautiful thing that starts to happen as you learn the art of meditation is you shift from being identified with the body or the thoughts or the personality to becoming the witness of it, becoming the loving awareness itself, or what my teacher called the one who knows. You shift your identity to be that timeless awareness that is who you really are, that got born into this body and that will leave and say, wow, that was an amazing ride, that incarnation, wasn't it? Fantastic. You'll see.

But the beautiful thing—as Lavoisier, who is the founder of modern chemistry, discovered, and for all of those who remember those chemical equations where you had to balance everything, this had to equal that—he said, nothing is lost, all is transformed. He discovered that in the physical world, that when you had carbon and hydrogen and oxygen and sulfur in certain compounds, you could change those compounds and molecules in chemical reaction, but you still ended up with the carbon and hydrogen and sulfur. Nothing is lost. All is transformed.

And it turns out, from some who have done this a long time, that as they say, death is perfectly safe. Because you shift your identity from that which you love—the people you care about, this beautiful Earth, this gift of incarnation—and you know that who you are is a timeless spirit. And then it allows you to live with greater freedom, because that's who you really are. And you see that secret beauty in everybody that you meet. Oh, here we are having a human incarnation experience. Isn't this wild? Instead of judging them—even that woman that Stephen talked about, sitting beside her abusive mother saying, "Well, that was a painful incarnation, wasn't it?" And it's an amazing kind of liberating perspective.

And then you plant beautiful seeds. You say, I'm here for a little while. What else to do but to plant seeds of love, of tenderness, of something of value, of creativity? Not that complicated.

This is from Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "To appreciate beauty and find the best in others, to leave the world a bit better whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, a redeemed social condition, to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—this is enough. This is to have succeeded."

And so you get to be here in this passing world. And by meditating, by quieting the mind and opening the heart, you actually get to plant beautiful things in your family and community, in the world. And as Thoreau said beautifully, "I have faith in a seed. I don't believe a plant will spring up where no seed exists, but I have tremendous faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

And so you are in this marriage that Hafez talks about—the marriage of space and time and beauty and eternity in your human life.

And I guess the last thing that I'll say is that things always want to start anew when you let go. There's just something fresh that will come. And sometimes it's terrible. And sometimes, as Dürckheim says, you have to be annihilated in some way and live through that loss to find something that is indestructible in you.

And here I am, seventy years old, almost seventy-one, and I have a girlfriend who's the same age, Trudy Goodman. We've known each other for forty years. We met at a retreat in 1974, the first retreat I taught on the East Coast with Joseph Goldstein. She came with her good friend Jon Kabat-Zinn. Around us came a bunch of the early ones.

Anyway, a couple of weeks ago, I took her for a ride on the Ferris wheel at Santa Monica Pier, and I whispered at the bottom something to them, so they stopped it at the top for me, and then I asked if she would marry me. And she said—happily, she said, "Oh yes, I will, as a matter of fact." I had a few rings. I said, pick one of these, you can choose what you like—knowing that she had her own taste. I thought that was a good beginning, actually.

So things can start anew. And that's true for all of us. There's something that wants to—as long as you're breathing, as long as you're sitting with somebody who's dying, it doesn't matter what's happening. You have the possibility of awakening and opening.

As the Buddha said, "If it were not possible to live with a free heart, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible for you, I offer these teachings. I offer these practices."

So it's your birthright. It's your possibility as a human being, as a spirit that you are, to learn how to live with this kind of wisdom and compassion amidst the changes.

The reason this trailer is here, you can blame this guy. And the reason that the community has grown and endured is partly Jack's teaching and also his training of many teachers and growing a beautiful community—a community with deep roots and a broad vision, both in Dharma and also in terms of really integrating into every aspect of life, into the complexity and the messiness of life.

So I can't help thinking about this building and ending and beginning without thinking about Jack and his beautiful work, his wisdom and heart. It's been a great ride. We'll see where it goes. So far, so good.

I have a couple of questions for you—that gets me off the hook of having to say anything. Two questions. First, what have you seen over these twenty-five years? Taking a big, wide arc of the purview of this whole endeavor, what's happening here as a microcosm of Dharma and societal change? What comes to you looking back over these twenty-five years? Does anything stand out?

Two things. The first is the good-heartedness of people. This is a little bit like a tide pool. Spirit Rock has five hundred or a thousand people come through every week for daylongs and classes, and the level of fundamental good-heartedness and sincerity is remarkable. Yes, people come in part for healing—that's part of spiritual life. People are drawn here sometimes because they're in crisis. But not just for that. People come for love, they come for community. The basic goodness of people over years and years is really a beautiful thing to see. And admittedly, I get to see you on your good behavior—I'm not living with you. But nevertheless, that goodness is in you, and it shines, and it's gorgeous. We talk about the Vipassana facelift at the end of retreats, where people finish and they look... we could sell it in Hollywood. Their eyes are bright, and they just look so beautiful and young. So that's one.

Something else that has surprised me is that this was weird in the beginning. I mean, we're still weird, it's true. But it was unusual—Eastern, Buddhist, whatever that meant to people. There was a much smaller group of people. And now there's a yoga studio and Starbucks and mindfulness on every corner. Mindfulness in business, mindfulness in athletics, mindfulness in schools. It became a whole industry. I wish I'd gotten stock options. Never too late.

People worry, is it going to get watered down? And I say, of course—we're Americans. We know how to use and misuse anything. But actually it's always been watered down. If you go to Asia and to the beautiful Buddhist cultures, there is tremendous gen-

erosity and devotion, and you feel it. You go to the pagodas and the stupas and there's so much love of Dharma. And then half the people go into the temple to make an offering so that they have a little better business that morning, or that their kid gets into the right school. If I give a little bit to the Buddha, will I get something nice back? It's sort of an exchange there. That's mostly their practice—giving a little bit to see if they get some good luck, basically. Or they go in to see if there's a fortune teller in the temple who can give them a good number for the lottery next week. It's watered down everywhere.

But when it moves out through society as it has, when you live in a place like Burma or Sri Lanka or parts of Japan where Buddhism is still so much alive, it also gets into the cells of the culture. There's an understanding that compassion is a value—as there has been in some ways in America, although we've lost a bit of it. There used to be barn raising and community, and now it's every individual for themself, that kind of hyper-individualistic, capitalistic misuse of it, really.

But what I see is that the Dharma is spreading, and it's spreading beautifully, actually. I completely trust the Dharma. It knows how to take care of itself. People use it in all kinds of ways, and always it has this perfume of liberation, this perfume of stillness and possibility. As it touches people, even if they don't know it, they begin to realize there's another way to live or be in this heart and mind. So I'm thrilled that it's all happened in this kind of wild way.

How about for you, Mark? Anything surprise you in the last twenty-five years?

What do I see? I started practicing Dharma in the early eighties in East London, and it was considered a cult, and I was considered weird. I'm surprised how quickly society—American culture has a way of gobbling up things and spitting them out—but I'm still surprised globally how much Dharma principles of awareness, presence, compassion, and letting go are seeping into mainstream fabrics. Whether it's the UK Parliament, where twenty percent of the sitting members have done an eight-week mindfulness course. Twenty percent. Can you imagine twenty percent of the Senate doing an eight-week mindfulness course? And then they did a white paper—Mindful UK. They did an extensive study and advocated that mindfulness be rolled out extensively in education, healthcare, and the justice system, with significant resources towards that. So to me, that's been the biggest shift, and surprise how quickly it happened. People were slowly growing more interested in practice, but the way research helped validate mindfulness meditation and made it go viral—that's been a big surprise.

Second question for you. One of the things I appreciated about the way you've guided Spirit Rock, which I see through the board and teacher meetings and the way you frame things, is that you really had the intention that this be a center lasting for

hundreds of years, not just the next twenty—albeit now we have a center that the structure will actually last for more than twenty years. What are your hopes as part of that vision? What do you wish for as Spirit Rock and the Dharma unfold? What's your aspiration?

It's not so much for Spirit Rock. It will do what it does, and it's not given to us. We get to plant our seeds of teachings or structures or things that are beneficial, and then other people will take it and do something with it. Who knows what? It may take other forms.

It's a much bigger thing for me. As I say very often here, it's really evident in the world now. We see the different kinds of suffering—global warming, environmental degradation, continuing warfare, racism—all of these things that are not being solved by the outer developments of human technology. We have the great library of Alexandria in our pocket. It also happens to be our memory right now, but anyway. We can connect from one part of the world to another. We have nanotechnology and space technology and all these things, and they haven't stopped racism, and they haven't stopped war, and they haven't stopped the destruction of the environment.

So the outer developments of our humanity, which are right now quite extraordinary, have to be matched with an inner level of human development that sees the interdependence of life—that what we breathe is also breathed by the Chinese and the Amish and the people in Mexico and Canada, that we inter-be and inter-are. We have to develop a kind of emotional maturity as a species that we have not yet really done.

And to the extent that, whether it's Spirit Rock or underneath it really, the teachings that the mind and heart can be trained and can be awakened—it's not just that we learn reading and writing and arithmetic. Those are all good things. But our children and generations ahead also need to learn the trainings of compassion and forgiveness and loving-kindness and interdependence.

That those are possible for us as human beings. And that we can change the way we live with one another. Now there's a dream worth having.

It seems like Spirit Rock has planted some seeds for that. In this big revolution of mindfulness going everywhere, Spirit Rock has certainly played a very important role in training teachers and people who are out there carrying these teachings forward.

I have a little story. I went to visit Thich Nhat Hanh, who had been here in San Francisco for six months. He was brought here by the head of Salesforce, Mark Benioff, who was also a disciple of his—a very wonderful man. Mark brought not only Thich Nhat Hanh but a whole group of his monks and nuns to stay in the city. Thich Nhat Hanh,

who is now 89, had had a major stroke, as most people know, and was getting good medical care in France, but there were things you could get in California. You know how it is—it's California. All kinds of alternative and interesting and good things. So Thich Nhat Hanh indicated, even though he couldn't speak much, that he wanted to come here. He did get good medical treatment and got better a little bit. He had a wonderful speech therapist, so he now has a few words. He can move one hand but not the other part of his body. But he came back a little bit, and he seems to want to hang in here because so many people love him and want to come and hold his hand and thank him for transforming their lives. He wants to be here to really receive that, to feel the honoring that people need to offer him. It's a kind of beautiful thing to watch.

One of the times we went over to sit, Trudy and I went over early in the morning at 6:30. They had a little zendo—a meditation circle—in the living room of this place where he and twenty monks and nuns were living. Afterward, we were taking tea with some of the senior monks and nuns, not with Thich Nhat Hanh himself. They said, "Oh, this week there's a big retreat down at Deer Park Monastery," which is his place near San Diego. They said, "We've got 600 or 700 people there." And I said, "That's lovely for a week. Are they there honoring the fact that their teacher is sick and here? Do they want to do prayers for him?" And she said, "No, that's the usual number that comes regularly there." I said, "Well, do they come when he's there?" She said, "Oh, even when he was well, he was only there every couple of years for two weeks."

Then she went on, and it was really beautiful. She said, "But it's not that they're there for his teachings. He said to the community, 'You are me. Not that you have my teachings. But I am in you and you are in me. You are me. So I don't have to be present physically. I don't have to be with you. You are Thich Nhat Hanh. You are carrying and embodying whatever I am. That is you. And we get to do this as one being, somehow together.'"

I was so touched when she said it. It wasn't like, "Okay, here, I've given this to you." It was a deeper level of interdependence, his wisdom understanding to say: You are me. And so they gather. Maybe it's like whenever two or more are gathered in his name, in that Christian tradition. There are so many other meanings—Sangha and minyan and holy community and satsang. But this had a very deep meaning, and it was beautiful to see.

Somehow I feel like even as we talk tonight and as we come and sit together, it's not this teacher or that master who's come through—which is a beautiful thing—but it's really reminding us who we really are. Each of us.

We've mostly talked about endings, which feels appropriate since we are, in a way, putting this beautiful hall to bed, to rest. But I also want to invite in the spirit of beginnings.

I spend a lot of time outdoors. I was just up north in Lake County, where they've had tremendous fires the last few years, and there's no better place to understand change and beginnings and endings than being out in nature. Especially being in a devastated forest and seeing the new life that springs up, the seeds that get released, the wildflowers that burst through, the light that's available that was concealed by the canopy—it makes room for a whole plethora of life forms that weren't available before.

And so I wanted to close with a leaning forward, as we migrate across the creek, across the road to the new center. I wanted to offer a blessing from John O'Donohue, who writes so beautifully from the Celtic tradition of blessing. We'll take the goodness of our practice here as we move into our new dwellings.

In out-of-the-way places of the heart, where your thoughts never think to wander, the beginning has been quietly forming, waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire, feeling the emptiness grow inside you, noticing how you have willed yourself on, still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety and the gray promises that sameness whispered. Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent. Wondered would you always live like this?

Then the delight when your courage kindled and out you stepped onto new ground, your eyes young again with energy and dream. A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not clear, you can trust the promise of this opening. Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning that is one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure. Hold nothing back. Learn to find ease in risk. Soon you will be home in a new rhythm, for your soul senses the world that awaits you.

These outer beginnings and endings, of course, speak to our own inner path of endings and beginnings.

Blessings. Take care out there.

CHAPTER 72

Monday Night Meditation Class with Jack Kornfield

Jack Kornfield · 2h18

> *This deeply moving talk was delivered in the days following the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, opening with a candlelit vigil honoring the 49 lives lost. Jack Kornfield guides practitioners through the raw territory of collective grief while pointing toward the Buddhist understanding that tears and healing are inseparable aspects of awakening. Drawing from the Ānāpānasati Sutta on mindfulness of breathing, he shares the remarkable story of a prisoner who transformed from violence to becoming 'the Monk of Trenton' through dedicated meditation practice.*
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> *Kornfield explores how stillness becomes the foundation for wise action, referencing the Tao Te Ching's teaching on waiting until the mud settles and the water clears. He recites the Buddha's teachings on directing the heart away from hatred and cruelty, emphasizing the ancient law that hatred never ceases by hatred but by love alone. The talk weaves together stories of the Amish farmer's wordless teaching through fireflies, the Afghan peace army of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and the recent transmission ceremony for new dharma teachers.*
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> *The practical relevance for daily life centers on becoming 'the one who knows'—cultivating loving awareness that can hold the ten thousand joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. Kornfield invites practitioners to find their own vow of compassion, patience, or deep listening, reminding us that it is possible to make the heart a place of peace even in uncertain times. The evening closes with an invitation to be 'citizens of the world of interdependence' and to develop what he calls 'the technology of the heart.'*

So, please let yourself come back in and get settled. Sit at ease, and let yourself listen—not so much to remember what's said, no quiz at the end, but more to listen in a way that if there's something that resonates as true, that's a reminder of what you know in a deep way, let that nourish you and let the rest go by.

As you will understand, I want to start the evening by reading a list of names. These include Amanda Alvier, Martin Torres, Luis Daniel Wilson, Daryl Roman Burt II, Deirdre Drayton, Alejandro Barrios Martinez, Anthony Luis Loren de Loza, John Carlos Mendez, Kimberly Morris, Stanley Almodovar, Luis Omar Capo, Juan Ramon Gutierro, Eric Ivan, Peter O. Gonzalez, Luis Villalma. Average age, twenty-three, twenty-four. There are fifty-three candles here for those whose lives were taken.

And then a little story, a letter in their honor. Some of you will have heard this in the past.

"Am I gorgeous?" my child asks, drawing the word out like pulled taffy. *Gorgeous.*

"Yes," I say, "you are."

The pink and teal dress is probably made of some highly flammable material, some chemist's approximation of satin. Pudgy fingers decorated with pink polish trace the sequins on the bodice. "I love this." A giant pair of bubblegum pink wings flap slowly. Little feet dance in sparkly red slippers. "I'm just like a real princess."

"Yes," I say, "you are."

Curly hair, joyful smile, flawless skin. This child is the epitome of beauty. This child, my son. He's four years old and prefers to wear dresses. Maybe it's a phase, maybe not. Even as I wonder how I produced such an angelic looking creature, I wish he would put on some pants and go back to playing with toy tractors. Not because it matters to me—it doesn't—but because I'm already hearing in my head the name-calling he'll face in kindergarten. Many adults already seem a bit disturbed by the dresses. Strangers utter awkward apologies when they realize he's not female. This culture wants little boys to dream only of baseball, trucks, and trains. This culture has no room for little boys who want to be gorgeous.

He picks up a parasol a neighbor gave him and opens it jauntily over his shoulder. "Am I beautiful?" he asks. And I sweep him into my arms and plant a kiss on his cheek. "Always," I say. "Always."

There is something full of tears and holy about being torn open, about remembering those who are young who are killed. The Lakota Sioux say that those who weep and grieve, their tears bring them closer to the gods. And so we start tonight with a vigil. You sat with these candles and with your own breath and your own humanity. We remember and we hold them. Wherever they are, may they find peace. May they rest in an ocean of love. And may those who love them find peace. So difficult.

In building this new community center, we knew it would be used for all kinds of things. I didn't expect the first Monday night I would teach here would be in part a vigil. But it is, because we're human beings and there's birth and there's death and there's joy and sorrow.

In our previous community hall—many of you had been there—the trailers that were all hooked together twenty years ago were falling apart, and the county wouldn't let us use them anymore. They were also inhabited by many other four-footed creatures. We calculated that there had been 2.6 million meditation hours in that building, so it had a very cool vibe, even though it was kind of funky.

I came into this hall last Saturday to teach a first daylong, one of the first events in this beautiful space. And I thought, okay, I'm supposed to say something really special. But actually, I was a little disoriented and uncertain. What's special to say? I don't know. And so I welcomed people and talked some about the core principles of Buddhist teachings—of transformation of the heart and awakening.

And then we sat together. The minute we got quiet and still, like tonight, I thought, "Oh, that's what this is for." And I felt wonderful. It wasn't blah, blah, blah. It was, "Ah, thank you."

What we've created—and it's really collectively from many, many people in our community—is a place of peace. A place of stillness amidst the tragedy of Orlando, amidst the weekly political tornadoes depending which direction you turn, amidst the mystery of birth and death, and the Warriors playoff games.

The Buddhist texts begin: "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Return to loving awareness. Return to the spirit of awareness that is free no matter the circumstances. Learn to quiet your mind. Learn to open your heart. Let the heart be still amidst all the turnings of the world."

St. John of the Cross says, "Disquietude is always vanity." Kind of interesting—it's sort of that old Victorian language. But there's something in it to reflect on. Disquietude is always vanity. You're upset, it's an ego trip. Somehow you're caught. I'm not sure how you would translate it in modern jargon.

But there's something as we sit together and quiet ourselves amidst healing and tears—our own healing, not just the healing of the rents in the fabric of the world. Almost everyone who sits quietly has something that needs to be healed in their bodies, in their history, in their psyche, in their hearts—and if none of the above, in their families. We can be sure of that.

And tears—they're called the tears of the way. They're the tears that come because you're paying attention. If we don't have a nation that can weep, then we're really in trouble. If we don't have politicians who can go on television and say, at the same time they're going to start a war or send our military or do something like that—if they're not weeping when they say it, they're not really paying attention.

So you sit among the tears and the healing and the beauty and the sacredness. All of this. And as you quiet yourself, the laws of human life become obvious to us. They're very central to the Buddha's teachings: that as long as greed and hatred and ignorance operate in us and in others, the result will be suffering. As long as dishonesty operates, as long as there is a lack of standing up for what's true and speaking what's true, we'll continue to suffer.

The people you have to lie to own you. The things you have to lie about own you. When your children see you owned, then they are not your children anymore. They are the children of what owns you. If money owns you, they're the children of money. If your need for pretense and illusion owns you, they're the children of pretense and illusion. If your fear of loneliness owns you, they're the children of loneliness. If your fear of truth owns you, they're children of the fear of truth. This is Michael Ventura. We pass these on to one another.

And yet that's not the only way to live, and we also know that as deeply as we know our own name. So we sit quiet and we see the contractions and the fear and the confusion in the heart, but we also see another possibility—that it's possible even in this uncertain world to make the heart a place of peace, to bring our mind to a greater steadiness, to practice forgiveness and compassion in our lives and with one another.

And it doesn't mean everything's going to be okay. It will be okay. Absolutely. It is okay. It just depends on your reference point for it. And it won't be okay. And that's okay.

As Helen Keller says, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do children as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

And so we sit in our vulnerability and in not knowing and in the mystery of our life. And in the times that are really beautiful.

I'm about to get married in ten days. My fiancée, Trudy Goodman, with whom I've been together now for the last four or five years—she's just my age. We're both about seventy-one. We've known each other for forty years. We have a great time together.

And we look at each other... We're going to go to Hawaii in about ten days and Ram Dass is going to do a little private ceremony and sprinkle some fairy dust, and we'll be married. That is, as long as neither of us changes our mind and gets talked out of it.

But what's true is that we look at each other and say, here we are, seventy-one. We love each other. We have a beautiful life in many ways. And dot, dot, dot. And dot, dot, dot. Things can change in a moment. Our lives can change, says the Buddha, as quickly as the swish of a horse's tail. Our lives, the people we love—and they will. Our lives and their lives will change.

So how do we steady our heart in the midst of this? And it turns out that it's possible to do so. The first step is simply to stop, to listen deeply, to remember what matters.

I'm going to read again a piece that I shared this last Monday night, just because I'm enamored of it right now, and it reflects something about stillness that I love.

A letter: "Years ago, I started a rigorous six-year academic program in Boston," this man writes, "that required me to work all day during the day, take my classes at night, and do homework on the weekends. On my first summer off, I wanted to get far away from these studies and work with my hands and be close to the earth. So I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me, and I decided to do it again next summer.

"That year, a good friend had died, and I drove from Boston to Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend. It was crowded, and what was normally a six-hour trip took more than ten hours. By the time I arrived, just before dusk, I was tearful, anxious, and exhausted. My Amish hosts had delayed their dinner for me. During the meal I tried to act natural but felt full of nerves. My Amish host could tell clearly something was amiss because at the end of dinner he said, 'Come with me.'

"I followed him to their backyard, which bordered an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gamboled about while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa. I did the same. The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. The sky was peach at the horizon and deep blue higher up. Stars had begun to appear. And then out of the alfalfa rose fireflies. At first a few, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars, heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. I felt my tears and anxiety leave me. The farmer turned and said, 'That's for you.'"

And here we are sitting with these golden hills and the last bit of light. And it's for you. It's for all of us.

Now when we still ourselves, when we sit quietly at ease or at peace, quiet the mind, it doesn't mean that we can't act. As it says in the Tao Te Ching: "Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate in action and thought, you reconcile with all beings. Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?"

And so in some way meditation is healing and attending of ourselves and a return to a sense of presence. And in some way it's also like the in-breath that comes before we breathe out. It is a stillness between the waves of the sea, as the poet says. And then we rise up, but somehow with a

a quieter mind and a clearer vision, and more than anything, a listening or a connection to what matters in our own heart. We can respond to the world rather than react. We can tend our world from a place of tenderness and wisdom rather than the body of fear.

Here's a text from the Buddha that I also put online for people in response to Orlando as part of it. Twenty-five hundred, twenty-six hundred years of repetition of these words in the temples:

Others will be cruel. We shall not be cruel. Thus we should direct the heart.
Others will kill. We shall not kill living beings. Thus we should direct the heart.
Others will speak falsehoods. We shall speak the truth. Thus we should direct the heart.
Others will be hateful. We shall be compassionate. Thus we should direct the heart.
Others will be fraudulent. We shall be honest. Thus we should direct the heart.
Others will lack wisdom. We shall cultivate wisdom. Thus we shall direct the heart.

And what it says is this: in this world with its homophobia and racism and environmental crisis, with the kind of troubles of humanity and continuing warfare that are so great, there is a deeper truth. Hatred never ceases by hatred, it goes on, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. And we hear those words and they ring in the heart as something that we know, that we've known for our whole life.

I'm so pleased because on a Monday a few weeks ago, and again a couple months ago, out of concern for all those images of the Syrian refugees—of women and children on the boats arriving on the shores of Lesbos—and our kind of fearful political climate, I asked how many people on this Monday night would be open to taking Syrian refugees, women or children, into their home for a year to help them get settled here. There were three hundred or more people present, and a third of the hands went up.

I took pictures of it. And I sent it to John Kerry and Nancy Pelosi and President Obama, to Dianne Feinstein and a bunch of others, even Paul Ryan—just to float his boat. I haven't yet sent it to Donald Trump. I wrote a few things, but mostly I said: please know that many Americans want to offer their hearts and homes to refugees. Do not let a climate of fear speak for the goodness of the people of this country.

That's really what we also come together for, whether it's in vigil or whether it's in support of one another—to remember what's possible for us as human beings. And now, when things are difficult, is the precise and exact place to do our meditation practices of compassion, loving kindness, steadiness of heart, awareness.

I remember after 9/11, I was getting gas at one of my favorite local gas stations where I know the folks, and they were freaked out because one of the owners was Persian, from Iran, and the other was from Sicily. People were driving through the gas station and shouting racist, anti-Arab, anti-Middle Eastern things, even though they didn't happen to be Middle Easterners. But they looked like them to somebody—some kind of crazy parody of what people were frightened of.

And I went in my attic and I found the one big American flag that I've owned for many years, which had been on my father's coffin because he was a vet—all folded in that triangle that they do. I unfolded it and brought it down and said, "Hang this in your station," which they did. People stopped driving through and shouting things at them. I didn't know why I'd kept that flag exactly, but I was really happy to have it.

So this is the time for us, as much as any time, to quiet ourselves first and then to stand up for our values, to stand up for what really matters.

Gandhi says, "I believe in the unity of all things and therefore I believe that if one person gains, the whole world gains, and that if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent." He said, "I believe in the power of each person to affect this world."

So don't think that how you live and how you tend your heart doesn't matter. It matters a lot.

I have this handwritten letter that came to me some years ago as part of a whole series of prison projects that I've been connected with—San Quentin and elsewhere. And it says:

"Today I started my 28th year in here. I laughed very hard when I read that you wrote, 'I might as well be a monk.' One of the nicknames they call me is the Monk of Trenton. I wasn't always this way. For the first ten years, I was mean and dangerous. In 1985, I was in ad seg"—which means I was in solitary.

for stabbing a man, and my mentor appeared in the form of a hitman for the Irish mob who was also a yogi. You know, you want your hitman to have some yogic powers, right?

He gave me a copy of the Anapanasati Sutta, which is the mindfulness of breathing text of the Buddha, and convinced me that I could not live my life out of anger and rage. He put me on a hatha yoga routine in place of my martial arts and had me do pranayama and sitting meditation.

My journal records: "When I was young, I wanted to be accepted. After I was accepted, I wanted power. After I had power, I realized that power without wisdom leads to sorrow. After acquiring a small amount of wisdom, I no longer desired to be accepted. I desired solitude. All life is change from within."

And then I had a dream, my journal records. I had a dream of violence so bad I woke up. Upon remembering the dream, I asked, "Is this me? Where did this violence come from?" I'm creating my own suffering. That night I closed the page of that journal with the words, "So ends this part of my life."

Except for the next two years, I didn't come out of my cell except to mop the whole block and all the tiers once a day. I gave away all my property except my law books and my yoga books. I gave myself to pranayama, yoga, and meditation. I followed the breath for a long time and practiced mindfulness. Nothing seemed to be happening.

And then I realized that the objects of my mindfulness began to have texture. By this I mean depth. This texture is deceptive because it arises from memory or imagination at first. And soon the texture reveals clarity. This is a movement to present awareness without the distorting effects of memory or imagination. I don't know if you understand that this is what's supposed to happen, but it's what happened with me.

It was during this period that people started calling me the Monk of Trenton. And for the last fifteen years, he's been a mentor to lots of young men in his prison in New Jersey.

So no matter how bad off you are, don't think that you can't make a difference.

I think of what happened in Orlando. Terrorism is a lack of imagination. And war is a lack of imagination—as if violence is the answer to solve our global problems or our problems with one another. I mean, we know it. I say it often. If you work in preschool or kindergarten, you say, "Use your words," right? "Don't hit that kid with a block." Don't we think maybe some of our world leaders could try the "use your words" thing, that it might work somehow?

But there are cycles of trauma. There are acts of depression and desperation and mental illness. And there's also a kind of despair that people have in areas of depression, or they feel like there's nothing really noble to do with their life. And we all have some calling to do something beautiful.

The greatest peace army that ever existed on earth was in the 1930s in what was then known as the Northwest Frontier of India, but actually is what's now called Afghanistan. It was organized by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Over one hundred thousand men, all devout warriors, all devout Muslims, many from warrior families, vowed to resist British rule without weapons in their hands or violence in their hearts. And they kept their vows despite many being killed, many imprisoned, in great provocation.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was this great big tall Afghani leader who became a really close partner of Gandhi in making peace. And he said, "We have all the warriors in our culture." And Gandhi said, "Good, let's use them. But let's use them in a different way and with a different imagination."

For us too, we have to set our hearts on what really matters in this life. It's so short. Unless you're young, and then it seems forever. But you'll see.

And actually, I'm hopeful. Even though there are many terrible things in the world, there are also, every day, hundreds of millions of acts of goodness—in families and communities, people caring for one another in extraordinary ways. But the bad stuff hits the news, right?

When I was visiting and doing a bit of teaching in Israel and Palestine for peace groups in different places, the thing that was most striking was how many wonderful acts of goodness and groups there were that I met with. The bereaved mothers and the former combatants for peace and the teenage *sulha* gatherings of Palestinian teenagers and Israeli teenagers meeting together. All kinds of groups doing things that never make the news. One bombing or rock throwing or act of violence and the newspapers are filled. But there are hundreds of groups of people with good hearts working quietly, persistently.

I'm also hopeful because just a few days ago we had a transmission ceremony, a ceremony of empowerment, for twenty-six new teachers trained by Spirit Rock and our sister centers—Insight Meditation Society, Insight LA, New York Insight, and others. It marked the end of a four-year program. Many of them had been practicing for ten, twenty, thirty years. Beautiful, wise people, many from the younger generation as well.

We put up all these silk banners, and we spoke to them about carrying the banner of the Dharma, the banner of truth and compassion, into the world. In the ritual, each one came up one at a time and lit a candle—not candles of vigil and mourning, but candles lit from the Buddha or from Quan Yin, the goddess of compassion and wisdom. They held the candle in their hand and then recited whatever their vow was as they became a teacher.

And their vows were beautiful. "I vow most of all to do my own practice, to keep my virtue, my kindness, my heart tended and pure, so that whoever I encounter and whatever I do, it comes from the deepest place of understanding I can." Many of them included that in their vow. I was really relieved, because you can get kind of intoxicated —"Okay, now I'm a teacher." Yeah, right. Try that at home with your spouse. See how that works with your teenage kid.

So that was part of it. And then there was this quality of refreshment, where people would say, "I will do this with a beginner's mind. I'll remember that the freedom I found can be found by everyone." In Zen they write, "How refreshing, the whinny of a pack horse unloaded of everything." As a poetic image, it's really an image of meditation—of putting down the worries and the burdens. Not that we don't have to tend to them, but finding a spaciousness and an openness that's bigger than the small sense of self.

Some held their candles and said, "I will carry patience and generosity through this world." Others said, "I will teach that the mind is the source of difficulty and also the place of understanding—that the mind and the heart can be trained, that the heart can be awakened." And to have one after another stand up there, their families gathered around—it was a little graduation ceremony; they didn't have mortar boards, but they had other beautiful garments—it was very special.

As they spoke their words, "I will teach that the mind can be trained, the heart can be awakened," I remembered these words of the Buddha: "Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you more than your own mind untrained. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can benefit you and help you more than your own heart and mind well-trained—not even the most loving members of your family."

And so here we come and practice together. We sit, we walk, we begin to pay attention. And it's actually not that easy. You were sitting there and you looked good, I have to say. But I know that in there—sleepiness, restlessness, worries, plans, imaginings, distractions, judgments. A few little judgments of yourself and others. You know how it is; the mind has no pride.

My favorite YouTube videos, if you want to look them up, are the videos of Professor Walter Mischel's experiment with young children and marshmallows—that famous psychological experiment you may know. They take a little child, bring them into a room, sit them in front of a table, and place a small plate before them with one marshmallow on it. Then they say very sweetly to this three or four or five-year-old—let's say four—"This is a marshmallow for you. If you can wait for a little bit and don't eat it, then when I come back, I'll bring you a second marshmallow, and you'll have two of them. But if you eat it, you just get one." Then they say bye-bye and close the door. And of course, the camera is on.

You watch these children, and they're looking really closely at the marshmallow. One kid picks it up and smells it, licks it a little bit, puts it back down. Another child looks around, takes a tiny bite, and puts it down—oh no, no, no. They're hysterical to watch. And it's really meditation, you know. It's really what you're doing. You're sitting here, and part of the time you want to go screaming out of the room. But you sit with your desires and your fears, your longing and your love, your hopes for things and your difficulties.

The river of thoughts goes by with so many opinions and views. You remember that cartoon in the New Yorker I mentioned, with the car crossing the Utah desert, vast landscape, and the roadside sign that says, "Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles." So you see it, and the river of thoughts goes by. And the river of feelings and emotions flows.

I have this list of 500 feelings that I read on retreat sometimes, starting with the A's: affectionate, ambitious, aggressive, anguished, ambivalent, angry, amused, amorous, aversive, antagonistic, antsy, apathetic, apoplectic, anxious, appreciative, argumentative, adamant, addled, amazed, blissful, brokenhearted, bonkers, bored, bad, belligerent, brave, bottled up, bouncy, buoyant, calm, cheerful, claustrophobic, compassionate, contracted, concerned, curious, crestfallen... it goes on and on and on. And you're sitting there, and that's what's going on—the river of thoughts, the play of feelings.

And you become the one who knows. You become the mindfulness itself, the loving awareness that sees the ten thousand joys and sorrows that make up your life and all human life. You take your seat amidst birth and death, sometimes violence and sometimes peace, sometimes what's beautiful and sometimes what's painful. Because we have it all. You reincarnate as a human being—this is it.

I actually do believe the world is getting better. One of my favorite books is *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, a wonderful recording of the last few centuries examining the levels of violence, the levels of oppression of women and children, the levels of slavery, and the amount of warfare. And even though it's bad, it's actually getting better. Steven Pinker is the author, a professor at Harvard. Slowly, slowly...

So what are we to do? Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer and humanist and visionary and sage, said, "If only it were so simple. If only we simply needed to round up the evil people and get rid of them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through every human heart, and who among us is willing to get rid of a piece of their own human heart?"

So instead we practice, and we become the witness to it with loving awareness, with compassion. We become gradually more fearless. And fearless doesn't mean you don't have fear—you will flunk the course periodically, as I do. It doesn't mean that. It means that when fear comes, you can bow to it and say, "Oh, this is the fearful mind. This is the doubting mind. This is the judging mind. Thank you for your opinion." But you don't have to follow it.

And you more and more trust—not getting rid of the evil in the world in that way, but trust that there is a deeper place of steadiness and peace and love that you can inhabit in your work, in your family, and in the family of the world.

Then you look around, and ask: what to do? This is from a dear friend, Naomi Newman. She wrote this at the end of a retreat she sat up the hill. We now have about 100 people on the LGBT retreat this week—I don't even know if they've been told yet what happened. But this is Naomi at the end of a retreat. She said, "A few days ago, late in the evening, I was sitting quietly in the back of the meditation hall,

And it was raining. And the room was dark except for candles on the altar. And it felt like we were all camped out around a sacred fire. And everyone sat so still, and my breath almost stopped. And I wondered what it was, the feeling. And then I realized, ah, this is contentment. There was nowhere else on earth I wanted to be, no one else I wanted to be with. I was peaceful and deeply silent, and all my struggles had dropped away, and I was content. I felt truly blessed.

And all of a sudden it felt like the blessings couldn't contain themselves, and I began blessing everyone in the room one by one. Their backs or the backs of their heads. And even the ones I couldn't see so well, I would shoot some blessings around a chair or into a leg or a hand until I got everyone in the room. And we sat in a sea of blessings until the bell rang, and I've been smiling since then.

And so you sit, and in the quieting of the mind and the opening of the heart, you come into community and connection with yourself and all those around. And then you get up. And as she said, I've been smiling since then.

It doesn't mean—she was on a long retreat, it may have taken her a while. It's just like when you read Nelson Mandela's autobiography and you see this magnificent human being coming out of 27 years of prison with such graciousness and forgiveness and compassion, changing the imagination of Africa and the world. But it wasn't so for all 27 years. Like the monk of Trenton, he had to work out some things too.

So it's not that all your sittings are going to be happy and blessed. You take what you get. It's your humanity that you work with. But it is possible for us. As the Buddha said, if it were not possible for you to awaken the heart and mind, I wouldn't teach you to do so. But just because it is possible for you, I offer these practices and trainings.

So you quiet yourself. You listen. And then you go back and find your way to express —those who held their candles up and said, I vow to practice patience, or compassion, or to listen deeply. That's my vow.

Here is Laurie Anderson, kind of a poem:

In the Tibetan map of the world, the world is a circle. And at the center, there's an enormous mountain guarded by four gates. And when they draw a map of the world, they draw the map in sand, and it takes months. And then when the map is finished, they say some prayers, erase it, and throw the sand into the nearest river.

Last fall, the Dalai Lama came to New York to do a two-week ceremony called the Kalachakra, which is a prayer to heal the earth. And woven into these prayers were a series of vows that he asked us to take. And before I knew it, I had taken a vow to be kind for the rest of my life. And I walked out of there and I thought, for the rest of my life? What have I done? This is a disaster.

And I was really worried. Had I promised too much? Not enough? I was really in a panic. They had come from Tibet for the ceremony, and they were walking around Midtown in their new brown shoes, and I went up to one of the monks and said, can you come with me to have a cappuccino right now and talk?

And so we went to this little Italian place. He had never had coffee before, so he kept talking faster and faster. And I kept saying, look, I don't know whether I promised too much or too little. Can you help me, please?

And he was being really practical. He said, look, don't limit yourself. Don't be so strict. Open it up. He said, the mind is a wild white horse, and when you make a corral for it, make sure it's not too small. And another thing: when your house burns down, just walk away.

When I read that sentence and I think of Tibet—when your house burns down, just walk away.

And another thing: keep your eyes open.

And one more thing: find the right road, because it's finally time to go home.

So I'm grateful for your attention, and that we got to sit together as we did tonight—to sit in vigil and to hold all those named and all those unnamed in our hearts. Yes, there are these fifty-three, but there are also the ones in Syria and Chicago, in Burma and New York, and in our own communities. The world really asks of us that we become citizens of this world in the deepest sense—citizens of the world of interdependence with the trees and the oceans and the animals, the other animals beside us that share it, and the peoples of this world.

It's time for humanity to develop inwardly, just as we've developed the great outer gifts of technology—to develop the technology of the heart. It's really come to be time. Nobody knows how old humanity is, but we know it's old enough to do better somehow.

And as we move through this blessed and beautiful and troubled world, may we each find our own vow to be a beacon of peace, a fearless carrier of respect and loving kindness for all that we meet, a teller of truth, a voice of justice, a protector of those who are vulnerable or targeted. And may the wisdom and integrity and compassion that is your true nature be your guide—be our guide—to how we live with one another.

I have one more little story for you before you go. We entered the Mayo Clinic for an evaluation of my husband's ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease, which often can happen pretty quickly, in the course of a couple of years: paralysis and death. As we did, we heard a pianist playing in the crowded atrium and realized it was the first song we had ever danced to, and the song we danced to at our wedding. My husband Randall put down his briefcase filled with doctors' reports and test results and took me in his arms and danced me all over that floor.

When it was over and folks were applauding, we became aware of how many people gathered there were in wheelchairs or walkers. We suddenly realized that in that spontaneous moment of celebration, we had been dancing on behalf of the life and love that lived in each person gathered together in that place. From the moment we looked

around the room, lined with wheelchairs and walkers, we found ourselves thinking of the pool of Bethesda. We imagined Jesus asking us, "Do you want to be healed?" And we thought we then heard him say, "Then pick up your feet and dance."

It's beautiful to sit in this new space with you as it gets dark on the summer evening, and to share both the vigil and the practice of compassion and hope and loving awareness in the midst of it all.

Thank you for coming. I'm really grateful.

CHAPTER 73

Vastness and Love

Jack Kornfield · 1h01

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Jack Kornfield reflects on the full spectrum of human experience—from his recent marriage to Trudy Goodman to helping with the cremation of a dear friend. He explores how we navigate life's inevitable cycles of birth and death, joy and sorrow, using the traditional framework of sīla-samādhi-paññā (virtue, concentration, and wisdom) as a rudder through uncertain waters.*
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> *Kornfield illuminates how virtue is not about rigid morality but about shifting our identity from reactive patterns to loving awareness. He shares the remarkable story of Amish forgiveness following a tragic school shooting, demonstrating how living with integrity transforms our sense of self. Through the metaphor of the poison tree, he describes three levels of working with difficulty: cutting it down, fencing it off with compassion, or transforming it into medicine for awakening.*
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> *The talk culminates in an exploration of our true nature as consciousness itself—vast, loving awareness that transcends the body and the small sense of self. Drawing on poetry from Jane Hirshfield, Mary Oliver, and Diane di Prima, along with the Buddha's final instruction to "make of yourself a light," Kornfield invites practitioners to rest in the spaciousness that holds all of life's changes. He reminds us that awakening is not about avoiding suffering but using it to open the heart, returning to the marketplace with "bliss-bestowing hands" to serve all beings.*

Please let yourself get settled and quiet.

As a way to collect the energy in here—because it's interesting, it's kind of bright and bouncy, the sound—I want us to do a little chant as a way to settle after conversation. The chant is one syllable. It's a seed syllable in Sanskrit that's called the syllable of wisdom because it's described as the first sound in life and the last sound. But most importantly, it's the seed syllable of wisdom because it's the sound of opening or letting go, the seed sound *ah*.

Let us sing *ah* together for a little bit as a way to collect our energy present and see what happens.

Ah...

That was nice. You sing good. And I don't know what I like better—the harmony when people start to sing the chord, or the silence afterward. That's also quite beautiful.

I'm glad you got to say hello to somebody. That feels important. There's something special for me tonight coming back to teach on just the second Monday night I've done. I've done a couple of other teachings in here since this space opened, but it feels very special to be here. And I'm so grateful that you've come as well.

I'm also in this beautiful time of my life, because as I said, I've recently gotten married to Trudy Goodman, who is a colleague and friend—I've known her for forty-three years. She's someone I also teach with. I knew her when she was a feminist, and she called herself Trudy Goodwoman for a while. Then I said, "Goodwoman, isn't that limiting? Why not Trudy Goodbeing?" She did that for a year or two.

We've already had four weddings. We've got a couple more to go. We started with a little private ceremony with Ram Dass in Hawaii. He married us in his garden, and it was just a couple of people—Ram Dass and a couple of others. It was such a beautiful blessing. Then we had ceremonies for our families, people in our community, on the East Coast. And the nice thing about it is that we're really happy. Everybody who sees us is happy, and they kind of shower us with their joy and happiness, and we get happier. It's like some virtuous cycle of deliciousness. So that's been going on all summer.

And it's not, of course, the only thing going on in the world, as we know.

This morning I helped with the cremation of a very close friend, Gail Seneca, who was a big part of this community and who died last Monday unexpectedly at age sixty-two. We did a lot of prayers and blessings, wrapped her in prayer flags, did all these things, and then she was cremated and burned and turned into ash.

I walked out and—you know, death is so mysterious. Here's this person, including you, by the way, in case you think it only happens to other people. Here's this person that you know and love, and they're in that form, and then they're just not there anymore. It's so clear that she's not that body, that corpse.

I came out and there were those beautiful wispy clouds today. And then I looked, and there was this incredible bush with purple flowers. It was like the earth was saying, "You know, here we are in this mystery."

And you can't really name it or hold on to it, but appreciate every moment of it.

Actually, I met Michael Murphy, who's an old friend, the founder of Esalen. He's in his mid-eighties. I met him in the summer, some time ago, and I said, "You know, are you down at Esalen these days much?" He said no. I said, "So what are you doing these days?" He said, "Well, Warriors games and funerals." That was his answer. When you're eighty-five, that's kind of the territory of it.

And then my daughter, who's thirty-one, went this weekend to a wedding. It was the fifteenth wedding she's been to in three years because her whole cohort of people in their late twenties and early thirties are getting married, and now they're all starting to have babies. It's just like watching the seasons turn as we start to move toward fall. This is the cycle of our humanity. And here we are.

There's an old Chinese poet who wrote something like—I wish I'd brought it with me—he said, "When I was young, I used to talk about the sorrows of the world to pretend that I had some profound nature and something important to say. And now I'm old and I've passed through all those difficulties, and I just smile when I see a flower and love the people walking by." Very, very simple.

So we come together in a temple like this. We're in a meditation class, really. And there's a kind of question for us about human possibility. What do we do with this human life that's given to us? Because not only is there birth and death that I'm talking about, but there's also politics—we won't go any further, but it's there, right? And there's hunger and injustice and warfare. And there's also incredible creativity and millions of acts of generosity on the planet every single day. How do we guide our life as human beings in this human incarnation?

If we don't understand, it's easy to get lost. And there are certain questions that can't be answered by Google. How do we navigate? Because without some sense of wisdom, some sense of understanding of this human predicament, this human life, we can move through life like a boat without a rudder, getting thrown around by the blessings and the curses and the problems and the things. It's very easy to get reactive—in family, that's why they call it nuclear family; in politics; in all kinds of ways. We all know this. And we get lost in that.

And yet who we are—and part of the reason I started with that particular guided meditation—who we are... There I was, sitting this morning with Gail's body. You are not this physical body. You inhabit it, you were born into it, you got issued a body basically. Okay, try this incarnation, see how you like it, what there is to learn. But you are the spirit that came into that body and will leave that body. You are consciousness itself.

When you're caught and identified and reactive to the various things that happen, when you're in the smaller sense of self—it's called in Buddhist teachings the small sense of self—you know what that means intuitively, don't you? It's also called the body of fear: when you're frightened and worried and contracted and reactive. You get caught in things, and basically you suffer, and you also can create suffering for the people around you.

But there's also a way—when we talk about a boat with a rudder—there's also a way to navigate the joys and sorrows of life more wisely. In the Buddhist teachings, one of the summary descriptions of the teachings in Sanskrit or Pali is *sila-samadhi-paññ̃a*, which means virtue, steadiness, and wisdom. These are seen as the practices, the understandings, the ways to move through human life.

Let me describe them a little, because they also speak to this shift of identity. I'll see if I can weave these together in some way.

So virtue is the first practice that allows us to move through the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, creating well-being and happiness for ourselves and others. And it's not about morality or the Ten Commandments and "thou shalt" whatever. Generally, when people say "thou shalt," there's some little voice saying, "You're not going to tell me what to do." So I don't think it works that way. It's much more about...

what brings us happiness and who we think we are. And in the simplest way, it's really very practical. It's hard to sit and meditate after a day of killing and stealing and lying. It doesn't work very well. You can't quiet your mind. You don't sleep well. First of all, it doesn't affect your body and mind in a good way to cause harm to yourself and cause harm to others.

But more than that, when you live with integrity, when you speak what's true, when you act in ways that don't cause harm to yourself or other people, it changes your sense of yourself. Because when you have that as a rudder, as a center—when you undertake the training or the practice to not cause harm through your speech or your actions to yourself or others—then when difficult things come and you remember that, instead of reacting, something shifts. Instead of being caught in "I'm angry" or "I need this" or "I'm addicted" or "I want this," it's as if who you are is bigger than those forces.

Your identity shifts from being caught in those things to being more like what we did in the meditation tonight—becoming the loving awareness that says, "Okay, I could get angry about this, or I could be upset, or I could hurt somebody because I feel so hurt, or I need this fix, whatever it is. But there's a recognition: this is not healthy for me or an-

other. This would cause harm to me or another." And so you shift your sense of yourself from being the one who's reactive to becoming the loving awareness that says, "You know, I don't think so. I don't think this is the way to live."

When you sit and meditate, it's not to have some particular state, but to quiet yourself enough that your conscience and your wisdom and your understanding can show itself to you. And you know how great it is to talk to somebody who has integrity, who speaks the truth. How beautiful it is to be with somebody who has that kind of integrity.

And then of course it gets more wonderful. Remember a couple of years ago, there was one of the many terrible mass shootings in America—the man who went into an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and shot ten little schoolgirls, five of whom died. This was in the news; everybody heard this story. Within hours of the shooter entering that one-room school and shooting the ten girls, killing five, and then himself, the Amish community forgave the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world almost as much as the incident itself did. Some worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy. But members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor.

A grandmother laughed when the reporter asked if this forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually met and thought we had a meeting to plan this forgiveness?" As the father of a slain daughter explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words. It is simply what we do now." Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were few words, but it was primarily the hugs, the gifts, and the mere presence—an act of grace that communicated Amish forgiveness. Of the seventy-five people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day before. And Amish people contributed to a fund for the shooter's family.

You start to hear this and you realize: what does it mean to live with a core of integrity, with your values clear, to not cause harm even if others do? As Booker T. Washington said, "Never let them pull you down so low as to hate them"—to not let your own heart be poisoned. And in the Dhammapada, in the beautiful verses of the Buddha, it says: "The scent of jasmine, rose bay, and sandalwood travels only as far as the wind, but the perfume of virtue rises even to the heavens."

This is the first piece of how to live wisely. And you can't do it without quieting yourself and realizing that all the reactions are not who you are. Who you are is wiser and bigger and more loving than that.

Then the second—samādhi—really means quieting the mind so that you can listen, so that you can see clearly, so that you can understand. And you quiet yourself not so much through effort. "I'm going to quiet myself now. Let's see, how many minutes do I have to do this?" We used to do that actually in the monastery. You know how it is with young guys—competitive meditation. "I can sit longer than you and not move." You get very concentrated, but then it passes. It's not about that.

It's something much more tender. It's a willingness to step outside of our social identity and our busyness identity, which we all have—texting and our screens and all the things that we tend to, which is all fine. But also to walk in the mountains, to sit quietly, to fill the bird feeder or walk the dog or play with a child or just sit quietly, to listen to a piece of music, and mostly just to stop and listen to your own heart. To have a conversation with your heart in some way, and to find your way to quiet your mind.

Because when you do, then you can see clearly. Then your conscience speaks to you. Then your wisdom body, that loving awareness, is accessible to you. And without it, the mind gets stirred up—like mud in water. You can't see clearly.

And when you stop, the mud settles a little bit, and then you can see.

Here's a poem from Jane Hirshfield, a wonderful poet and friend in Mill Valley, about tenderness and inspiration, and how to quiet yourself:

Think of those Chinese monks' tales: years of struggling in the zendo, and then a clink while sweeping up of stone on stone, and poof—enlightenment.

Emily Dickinson's wisdom: "Truth in Circuit Lies." Or C. Grant's *Common Birds and How to Know Them*, New York, Scribner's, 1901:

The approach must be by detour, advantage taken of rock, tree, mound, and brush. But if without success this way, use artifice. Throw off all stealth's appearance, watchfulness. Look guileless, a loiterer, purposeless. Stroll on, not too directly gazing at the bird, avoiding any gaze too steadfast. Or failing still in this, give voice to sundry whistles—chirp. Your quarry may stay on to answer you.

It's lovely, from the birding book, to say you don't go grasp the bird. You wander about with a kind of sidelong glance. Oh, there's a little bird over there—but you don't really let them know that you're looking.

Or be briefly tried but stymied, give it up, do something else. Leave the untrappable thought, go walking. Ideas buzz the air like flies. Return to sit. A fox trots by with a cream-dipped tail and red fire legs doused watery brown. Enlightenment, wrote one master, is an accident—though certain efforts make you accident-prone.

There's something about us as human beings, especially in modern times, that needs to find ways to still ourselves, to quiet ourselves—for the sake of our children, for the sake of the earth that needs to be listened to, for the sake of one another and all the differences that make us up. Because no amount of outer technology—nanotechnology, space technology, biotechnology, computers, this whole vast amazing development we have—is going to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing destruction of the environment, continuing tribalism. Those arise out of the human heart. And the outer developments that are so remarkable now have to be matched by inner human development.

To do that means we have to learn to listen, to hear our interdependence, to feel our connection with life, to see with clarity, to listen to conscience—because there's a lot of other... I think the technical Sanskrit word is BS that's out there. You know what I'm saying. And so that too becomes important to us.

To live a life that's wise requires a non-harming virtue. It requires a way of quieting ourselves. And when we do, what happens is that we get bigger—like we did in that meditation, at least for those of you for whom it was the right practice tonight. There are lots of other practices, so if it wasn't, do something else. But you step out of the small sense of self, the body of fear, all these thoughts and worries, and you realize there is a kind of vastness that, as the mind quiets, allows you to see—not just caught up in your own personal stuff, but something bigger. The turning of the seasons. The love that's big enough to hold it all.

And then, of course, it gets more difficult, because you go to wisdom, and wisdom is really the question of mystery. Things are impermanent. Standing there in Mill Valley by the crematorium oven with this body and the Buddha's words: it seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not.

This is one of the big mysteries. In fact, I think it's in the Mahabharata—there's a conversation, maybe between Krishna and Arjuna, and they ask, what are the great mysteries of the earth? And Krishna answers: one of the great mysteries is that people can see others die all around them and still think it won't happen to them.

Things are impermanent, and they're uncertain. My teachers loved uncertainty. My teacher Ajahn Chah, whatever questions we would ask—profound or mundane—regularly he would smile and say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" Especially if you had a really pressing question. It was a beautiful thing. It just opened the gates to realize that we don't actually know. Some things we know.

I have this guest card, plastic, that I got at a hotel in a developing country. It says: "Dear Guests, It is our pleasure to provide you with a stamp postcard for sending out to your loved ones around the world. Please leave the postcard at the desk or to receptionist after filling up the address and your greetings. We will be glad to mail for you. Note: Due to a poor postage system, your postcard may take some time to reach, or even may not always reach your address. Hotel Management."

That's kind of human life, really. It's just how it is. There's ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, birth and death, sweet and sour. Duality is woven in this way, and this is what we get in human incarnation.

So how do we work with this? Here's a little more meditative and kind of wisdom strategy. It says, being rather practical, that there are different strategies for releasing ourselves when we're caught in the small self and the body of fear. The metaphor used is of a poison tree. There's a tree whose berries are poison. The first strategy is to cut the tree down so nobody gets poisoned—you don't eat the berries, you just get rid of it.

That's one level. Then the next strategy says, but trees are beautiful. We need them to exchange carbon dioxide and oxygen. Trees have all kinds of uses—let's not cut it down. Let's just put a little fence around it with a sign that says, "Don't eat the berries. They're poison for human beings." That way we're not harming the tree, and no one else is harmed. More gracious.

And then there's the person who wanders along and says, "Oh, I've been looking for a tree like this! These are the berries that, if you take them and grind them up and add a little sulfur and whatever the right ingredients are, become the medicine that cures some of the most difficult diseases of the world." This poison becomes something of value.

So that's the metaphor. How does mindfulness and shift of identity work with it?

At the first level—the cutting down part—you have things arise, as we all do: your fears, the repeated stories, the self-judgment, the anger, the addictive patterns, the kinds of delusion and confusion, the prejudices that are part of your life. And of course, the first step is simply to see them. Just like seeing the tree, you need to actually recognize, "Hmm, these things may not have my best interest in mind, these thoughts.

They're actually not on my side. They're old habits." You may know who put them there or where you got them, but they arise and they're painful. They cause you suffering; they cause others suffering.

So first, like the Buddha under the tree of enlightenment, when all the difficulties arose—personified as Mara, the Indian archetype of all the difficult energies of life—the Buddha would say, "Oh, is that you again, Mara? Mara in the form of fear, Mara in the form of anger, Mara in the form of greed and grasping, Mara in the form of self-judgment. Oh, I see you, Mara."

Sometimes all that's needed is to say, "I see you," and who you are becomes the loving awareness—you're not so caught anymore. Does that make sense? That's partly why we meditate, to free ourselves.

But then sometimes, at this level, you may actually need to cut the damn tree down.

I'm remembering this story. Some decades ago, I was teaching at Esalen, and one of my teachers and friends, Zen Master Seung Sahn—a Korean Zen Master who had a big center in Providence and centers all around the country—came to visit. Among his students was a couple I was close to. They both became his devoted students. Then they went through a really messy breakup and divorce.

The man was just brokenhearted because this woman had left him for some other young guy. The Zen master was very tender and compassionate, consoling him during that breakup when they were all there together.

Then the Zen master went away, traveled back to Korea and around the world, and didn't come back for almost a year—nine or ten months. When he returned, we all came to greet him. I was back there again, including this fellow whose wife had left him. The master looked at him and said, "How are you?" You could see his face was morose; he was still in the middle of grieving.

The master said, "Oh, I brought you a present." He reached in his bag and pulled out this beautiful mala with beads of Kuan Yin on it. "Here, give me your hands." He placed it in his hands, then hauled off and smacked him across the face and shouted, really loud, "Let her go!"

We were all stunned—our jaws dropped open. I'm not saying this is good therapy or anything like that. But you know what? It worked.

There was just a shift. It was like, "Okay already. Enough self-pity. Enough grieving—it's fine. It's time to just put it down." It was as if he said, "You're bigger than that. Who you are is not just that. It's not all that identification and all the tears."

Who you are is much bigger than that. And he could see it. It was kind of astonishing.

So that's the first level, where you recognize what's there, and in recognizing it, you let it go. Or at times, as in twelve-step work, you simply say, "I'm not going to drink anymore." You just don't do it.

Then the next level, where you put the fence around the tree, is the level of compassion—in which you see that everything deserves compassion. Every single thing.

I was visiting Ram Dass in June. Ram Dass is a very dear friend. He has this giant altar in his living room. He lives in this house in Maui, in his wheelchair, where he's been for seventeen years since his big stroke. He can still talk—with some aphasia, but he can speak pretty well. And he's just very, very loving.

On this altar are pictures of his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, and Ramana Maharshi, and Ananda Mayi Ma, who was one of the greatest saints of the last century in India. You know, this Baba and that Swami, and images of the Buddha and Ganesh and Saraswati—it's a polyamorous altar, basically. But also on this altar, with all these pictures of Meher Baba and all these great beings, is a picture of John Boehner and one of Dick Cheney. And Ram Dass says, "If you're going to practice love, you've got to stretch a little bit."

James Baldwin says, "Love takes off the masks." It really asks something much deeper than the superficial—to look with the eyes of compassion at every single being. And then the poison starts to get transformed into medicine, in some way, when you bring that kind of tenderness and care.

And if you want to turn it into an even deeper medicine: in Tibet, they pray for suffering. "May I be granted enough suffering that the great heart of compassion will awaken in me." Bring it on, baby, in some way. That's a tough prayer. It is.

The goal in spiritual life isn't to avoid suffering. Anybody succeed at that, by the way? Raise your hand. I'm just checking. The goal is to use suffering as medicine—to transform your heart and to remember who you really are.

There's a poem from Deena Metzger, a wonderful friend. Some of you may have seen the image—this was back in the seventies or eighties—of this woman who had a mastectomy and had this huge dragon tattoo across her body. And there she is standing with one breast and the dragon up her body. Quite wonderful, a beautiful being. She says, "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep. And we will have rain, and we will begin again."

There's something in her poem that says: show me the sufferings of the world, and I will transform them into freedom. And that's really the third turning of the medicine.

You do it through this shift of identity, where you realize that what you face and what you go through is not so personal. It's part of the human journey.

In this new book that I'm just finishing, I tell the story of this woman, Whitney Williams, who went back to the Midwest to take care of her parents in rural Illinois. Her dad was in the early middle stages of Alzheimer's, and her mother had broken her hip and was having trouble. Her only sibling was her brother, and all he wanted to do was not get involved—he'd just call his sister and say, "You take care of it." You know that kind of family dynamic.

So she took a month off from work. The house was in shambles. Her father couldn't care for himself very well. Her mother's fracture was still healing. She knew they couldn't stay there, but it was her childhood home. It was her parents. And she was facing the reality of their aging and their demise.

So she walked up on a hillside nearby that she'd known growing up, and she just started to weep—because she didn't want to lose her childhood home. She didn't want her parents to get sick and die, or have to leave their house either.

And then she looked out. There was this vast landscape—the little town, the farms, the cumulus clouds, the dotted clusters of other farms in the distance. And somehow she felt held more in the vastness than when she was inside the house. She could instinctively feel how everything had its seasons.

Arriving, departing, flourishing, struggling, coming into being, fading away. And she began to reflect: how many other people are in this same predicament?

As she breathed more with this kind of ease, her mind opened further. She realized, "I'm not the only one with aging parents. There are seven million others this very day in this country." The space opened, and she felt somehow more trust. We can do this. We know how to do this.

With this spacious heart, we remember a bigger picture. Even though illness strikes, even though parents are dying, even though some form of loss comes—and it will come—we can also recognize that it's part of the rhythms of life. Among the multitude of humans, many like us are experiencing loss or pain or change or needing renewal. And the world keeps turning. The farmers growing food, the markets trading, the musicians playing. We live amidst a great, ever-changing paradox. Breathe, relax, one day at a time.

Whitney realized all of these things and cried again, her heart tender—this time tears of relief. Somehow we move from our separateness to sense both the vastness and the love that propels life itself, and that we are a part of it.

I'll tell this story briefly, because I've got other miles to go here tonight, of my friend Salam, who was in a prison in the Middle East. He'd been a journalist and was imprisoned and tortured. He almost died from his torture at one point. He said, "I did die, actually."

I met him because he was doing hospice work. I said, "What are you doing here in the Bay Area doing hospice work?" He said, "Well, I like to sit with people and let them know that it's perfectly safe." I thought, well, that's interesting. Tell me.

He said, "I was in this prison on and off for a long time—beaten, tortured. And then one day, even my medical records say that I died. This guard, I'd done something that angered him, and he was kicking and beating me, blood coming out." He said, "And I floated out of my body, as people do in accidents." Even in meditation it's possible—you can train yourself to have out-of-body experiences. You know you're not just the body.

He said, "I was floating on the ceiling watching the boot kick the body and all this, but it was very peaceful." He said, "And then something really interesting happened." I sat up. "Oh?" He said, "Yeah, then it was as if a bubble popped. I was no longer located as a self witnessing, observing this. That sense of self burst open, and I became everything. I was the green paint flecking on the prison wall. I was the goat you could hear outside on the hillside. I was the boot kicking the body. I was that body lying there."

He said, "This immense joy came to me, because I knew that who I was, was everything. I was life, and I could never die." When he came back in a broken body at the bottom of the cell, he healed and eventually got out. He said, "I couldn't fight for one side or another anymore." He had been of one particular group. He said, "I married a woman from the opposite side. And that's the closest thing I could come to saying: this is what I understood."

You are loving awareness itself. It's born into you—spirit, consciousness, this mystery within. Oh, what's scientific about saying the brain makes consciousness? Well, that's a sort of small story. Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, said you either need a big story or no story at all when you're facing the mystery.

You're loving awareness.

When the Buddha was walking down the road after his enlightenment—at least as this story is told, and we're just telling stories, right?—a man came up to him and said, "Wow, you seem like this amazing being." The Buddha was a handsome prince, and obviously he was in a good mood after his enlightenment. The man asked, "Are you some kind of wizard or magician?"

No. Are you a guru? No, not exactly. Well, you know... Are you enlightened? Buddha said, no. Interesting. Are you a god? No. Are you a man? No. What are you? And the Buddha looked back and said, "I am awake." And the word Buddha means awakened.

So he wasn't claiming anything—I'm this or I'm that. What I am is awareness itself, which is what you are. And you know this. You've walked in the mountains, or you know it from when you gave birth to a child, or you sat in that mystery with someone as they died. Or when you took peyote or some other substance—come on, let's fess up, right? Or when you heard that amazing piece of music, or were making love. You all know it because it's true. It's absolutely true. It's your nature.

And we become reduced. In fact, I think it was Alan Watts who said the mind is actually a reducing valve. The mystery is so extraordinary and around us all the time. I was looking at those flowers this morning after the cremation, and I could have just drowned in the purple of those flowers. What is a flower? Why does the earth—the Japanese poet says the earth laughs in flowers. How can it be that it makes all these colored flowers? Yes, there's evolution and I believe in that and all of that, but it didn't have to do that, you know. This is really extravagant. The earth deals in extravagance. It's so mysterious.

And we wake up to it. Little children have it, this sense of mystery. In Bali they say that the people closest to the gods are newborns and old people. The newborns because they've just come in and so they're, as Emerson said, trailing clouds of glory and seeing everything anew. And the old people because they know they're headed back to that mystery. The people farthest from the gods are middle-aged people with mortgages. But what's true is that that's not who you are. Who you are is something much vaster and much more beautiful than that.

So a couple of poems about death. This is again from Jane Hirshfield. She writes:

The dead do not want us dead. Such petty errors are left for us, the living. Nor do they want our mourning. No gift to them, not rage, not weeping. Return one of them, any one of them to the earth and look. Such foolish skipping, such telling of bad jokes, such feasting —even a cucumber, even a single aniseed, a feast.

There's something so blessed about every moment and every taste on this earth.

And this from Diane di Prima, old friend and Buddhist poet, for Zen Master Suzuki Roshi of San Francisco Zen Center:

After you died, I dreamed you were at my apartment and we ate soba together, you giggling and I slurped a lot. And you said, "Don't tell them I'm not dead," and pointed down the street toward the Zen center.

I don't want them to bother me. We laughed and drank the broth, and I kept that promise. I think they still don't know.

So we're here in this mystery. And it's not about knowledge—it's really about wonder. Emptiness and fullness. And love.

I was talking to a wise elder recently, and one of the things she does with her life—she's been a therapist and healer for a long time—is she's worked often over the years with people whose children have died. Which is both a tremendous and terrible loss, almost unspeakable in some way, and yet it also happens. In the old days it happened all the time. You had twelve children because you hoped that six survived.

We sort of adopted some families from Laos, my family, because I can speak Lao and Thai and some of those languages. And the first family that we adopted for many years had four kids—and these were the four that were left of their eight children. That's how it used to be. But now we can hardly imagine it.

But this elder works with them. And she said one of the most important things that we do, when we get to it in the work, is have them talk to their child. She said it's astonishing the kind of intelligence and understanding that they hear from the spirit of that child to guide them. "Mommy, Daddy, I don't want you to live your life just weeping. I want you to get..." very specific things.

I'm not saying you need to believe this. But I'm saying it because we're in a mystery and nobody can really tell you. But over thousands of years and millions of people and vastly different cultures, there is an understanding that who we are is not limited to this body. And something in you knows that it's true as well.

In the earliest teachings of the Buddha, he says, "I am awake. This is what I am. I am awareness itself. I am compassionate, loving awareness." And then he says, "You too, oh nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember that this is your birthright." And when you remember it, it turns out that that awareness which is who you are is commensurate with—perhaps that's not the right language—is composed of love. They're really not different, because it's the same thing. It's what consciousness is itself.

I remember being in a long retreat where I was doing all these samādhi practices and jhānas, dissolving into love and light, my body disappearing, things like that. And then I was sitting and I went outside. It was a kind of clear night, and I could experience starlight almost like it was touching my body. And then I realized those photons from the stars—just a little scientific thing—they were an expression of love, and that the stars were actually making love with one another by sending out their light to the other stars. I mean, that's just a poem for you, but it was, you know, what do they call them, mystical experiences or something like that. It was very cool.

Test it in yourself. When your identity shifts from the small sense of self—me, my body, my things, my worries, my fears, my hopes, my grasping—and you sense the vastness, the turning of the seasons, the rhythm of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, of gain and loss. When you sense this and breathe into it and rest in that vastness as we started, see whether it's also true that the heart becomes lighter and as expansive as the mind. In Sanskrit, mind and heart are the same word: citta. They both open at the same time.

There's the story of a young monk who'd struggled and struggled to get enlightened, an old Zen story I haven't told for a decade or two. He struggles, but it didn't work very well. And then there was a rumor that there was this wise old master who lived in a hut or a cave way at the top of the mountains. So he says, "Enough of this hard training in the Zen monastery. I'm going to go find that old hermit who's supposed to be the real deal up there." You know, like the guru in the cave—maybe he will help me. And so he starts trudging up the mountains, walking in these very high mountains. He gets up and up and up and up. And then he sees an old man coming down.

Carrying a big bundle. And he stops the old man and says, "Do you know anything about this old man that lives in the cave?" The old man's face lights up, and the seeker realizes it could be him. The old man says, "Why do you ask?" And the young monk says, "Well, I've been struggling for ten years, meditating, trying to get enlightened. I've come to find an answer. Do you know anything about this enlightenment, old man?"

The old man looks him in the eyes and then just drops the bundle that he's carrying.

And you know how it works in these Zen stories—for some reason, it's very easy. Of course, he did ten years of heart training first. But the old man drops the bundle, and the young man climbing the mountain says, "That easy? You just let it go." And he has this beautiful, liberating moment. All that I sought is just about letting go—not trying to get enlightened, not trying to be something. Just be. Just be the awareness, the love itself.

So then he stands there and turns back to the old man and says, "So now what?" It's a question, isn't it?

And the old man reaches down, picks up the bundle, and walks off toward town.

The reason this story is told with this particular rhythm is that this is the story of the bodhisattva—of the being who remembers who they are and then enters the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands. Comes down from the mountain or the temple, or out from your walk by the ocean, or whatever nourishes you and reminds you of the vastness, and then brings a gift to your workplace, to your family, to political life, to the environment. Because it's all part of you. And you have something beautiful to give because you know that who you are is that too. That you are loving awareness. You are connected with it all. It is your true nature. You have gold in you. You have light in you.

And you know, when you meet somebody who has a lot of light, you know what that's like. I don't mean some sort of woo-woo type light. I mean, because children have it—on a good day anyway, right? That's the way children are. There's just this beautiful light that shines out of people's eyes. That's what was born into you.

Here is another poem from Jane Hirschfield, called "Lighthouse." Just a few lines:

Most lights are made to see by, this one to be seen.
Its vision sweeps its one path like an aged monk raking a garden,
his questions long ago answered.
Far off, night grazing horses, breath scented with oat grass and fennel,
step through the light, disappear,
step through it, disappear again.

The sweep of the lighthouse.

And here's the complementary poem from Mary Oliver, called "The Buddha's Last Instructions":

Make of yourself a light, said the Buddha before he died.
I think of this every morning as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds of darkness,
to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet, even green.
An old man, he lay down between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything, knowing it was his final hour.
Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen.
No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life.
Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.
Make of yourself a light.

So the old man walks with his bundle back into town with bliss-bestowing hands. He brings a tenderness and a compassion for everybody who's forgotten who they really are. He teaches vastness. He rests in openness.

Refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all was lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

And so when you remember who you are, even in the midst of what life brings you—which it does, joy and sorrow—you bring love and wisdom and something that's undying, that can't be taken from you.

So a last little story. This is from a woman bringing her husband to the Mayo Clinic for evaluation. He had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and his body was beginning to shut down. Usually you just have a couple of years.

"We entered the lobby of the Mayo Clinic, the main lobby, and there was a pianist playing. And we realized it was the first song we had ever danced to, a song we had danced to again at our wedding. And my husband Randall put down his briefcase filled with all the doctor's reports and test results, grabbed my waist, took me in his arms, and danced me across the floor all around that lobby.

"And when it was over and folks were applauding, we became aware of how many people had gathered around—were in wheelchairs and with walkers. And we suddenly realized in that spontaneous moment of celebration we had been dancing on behalf of the life and love that lived in each person gathered together in that room.

"I looked around that room lined with those waiting in wheelchairs. We found ourselves thinking of the pool of Bethesda. We imagined Jesus asking us, 'Do you want to be healed?' And we thought we heard him say, 'Then pick up your feet and dance.'"

So let's sit for a moment. Remember who you really are. Rest in loving awareness and the vastness. It is your home.

Thank you for coming. Take time to walk in nature and quiet yourself and to sit and meditate—more than anything, to listen. And come back again sometime.

Thank you. Good night.

CHAPTER 74

Monday Night Meditation Talk: The Perfection of Patience

Jack Kornfield · 1h42

> *In this Monday night dharma talk, Jack Kornfield continues his series on the ten perfections (pāramī) by exploring khanti pāramī—the perfection of patience. Rather than understanding patience as merely waiting for results, Kornfield reframes it as constancy and presence, drawing on Suzuki Roshi's teachings. He examines how our hurried culture pushes against the natural rhythms of life, using the story of Zorba and the butterfly to illustrate the consequences of forcing things before their time.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together wisdom from diverse sources—Thomas Merton, Rumi, T.S. Eliot, and the Tao—to illuminate how spiritual practice is not about perfecting oneself but about perfecting love through presence. He shares personal stories, including his daughter's Balinese dance recital and conversations with Silicon Valley executives, demonstrating that this teaching applies equally to meditation cushions and boardrooms. The talk addresses how patience relates to social action, citing Gandhi's practice of taking one day weekly in silence even during the most intense periods of activism.*
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> *The teaching culminates with Arnold Lobel's beloved Frog and Toad story about planting seeds, offering a gentle reminder that our role is not to force growth but to provide conditions for natural unfolding. Kornfield invites practitioners to study their own impatience with curiosity and loving awareness, recognizing that the 100,000 mahākalpas of practice are really found in 100,000 breaths, steps, and moments of presence.*

And again, after just a minute or two, you notice that you can sense the breath for a time, but after three breaths or ten breaths, the attention is pulled elsewhere—to planning or remembering or itching or imagining, feeling something.

When the waves are small, let them be in the background. But if a strong wave of experience pulls you from the breath, then let go of the attention to the breath and instead receive this new strong wave as if with a bow. Name it gently: "Oh, sadness, sadness," or "excitement," or "planning," or "remembering," or "itching, tingling." And as you name it, feel the energy of this wave move through your body and mind. After it passes, or you are at ease with it, sense the space of stillness, and then return back with loving awareness to the next breath.

So you rest here in the reality of the present—with this breath, this moment—or with the strong waves, receiving them with the same loving awareness, naming them. And then, after time, return back gently to the breath. This breath, or this moment's experience, receive with loving awareness, with mindfulness that says, "Yes, this too."

Presence. Loving awareness. As the body breathes itself, as the waves of experience rise and pass away in the space of loving awareness. And you're just here—mindful, spacious, acknowledging as it comes and goes. This breath. This wave. And as you do, let things get quieter and stiller around all the waves that rise and fall. This moment met with awareness and kindness.

Let yourself settle and listen in whatever way is comfortable for you. You don't have to remember anything from this. There's no quiz at the end, no exam. But more, listen in a kind of contemplative or meditative spirit, which is to say, let the words and stories come. And if something touches that which you know to be true in yourself, if it's really a reminder of something that you know and value, then that's something worthwhile for you. And if it doesn't seem right, just let it go.

Over the course of this year, in these Monday nights that I'm able to do, I've been working through a series of teachings which are called in the Buddhist tradition the ten perfections, the perfections of the heart. And I like to speak of them also as an expression of our own Buddha nature, of what is born into us, of the beautiful qualities and capacities that every human being is born with and that can be developed or brought forward, even though we might forget or lose them.

So we've talked about in these past months the quality of integrity or virtue, the quality of generosity of a generous heart, the quality of wisdom, the quality of wise effort—those kinds of qualities. And tonight we get to talk about what's traditionally called the perfection of patience.

Now, this is a tough one, and not just for you. The story that starts these perfections, which I didn't really tell on the first Monday night of this series, is that when one takes a vow to become fully enlightened as a Buddha, it's said that having taken such a vow, in general—and it took the last Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha, more or less this amount of time—

practicing patience and wisdom and loving-kindness and compassion and dedication and truthfulness and generosity and so forth, for 100,000 mahakalpas and four immensities.

And a mahakalpa is described as the length of time it takes if you have a mountain as high as Mount Everest—seven yojanas high, the distance an ox cart can go in a day—and every hundred years, a bird flies across the top of the mountain with a silk scarf in its beak, dragging it across the summit and wearing it down a little bit. When that mountain is worn down, that's one mahakalpa.

So you hear this and you think, all right, I can be patient a little bit, and maybe wise and virtuous once in a while, but 100,000 mahakalpas and then four immensities?

The beautiful thing about it is that it's a mythological number. It's not meant to be literal, because when you hear it, it's impossible. And what it actually means is that you have to understand this not within time, but as an invitation to see something outside of time—something more universal and grand, like the turning of the seasons and the turning of the galaxies themselves.

When you understand it this way, you start to see that these perfections are not something out there to be gained after 100,000 mahakalpas of the bird wearing the mountain down. Rather, they're a kind of flowering that can happen—not because you get better and better at something, but because you discover that this is actually who you are. This is your own true nature.

I was running a retreat and doing a ritual, a ceremony for the empowerment of some new teachers at our retreat hall, which is part of this campus beyond this building. Many of you have done retreats there. It was finished in 1999, so it's been open for seventeen or eighteen years. And I did a quick calculation for the fun of it: How many people come on retreat typically? How many retreat days a year? How many hours during the day? And I realized—oh, 3.4 million meditation hours in that room already. I thought that was very impressive.

So these numbers, mahakalpas and things like that, they actually happen. And they happen to you, because it's not 100,000 years of the bird, but 100,000 breaths. And how many do you pay attention to? And what does it mean in 100,000 steps? Ten thousand moments of looking in the eyes of the people that you love around you. The invitation from these qualities is to make these moments really alive for yourself, which is really, in part, why we practice.

Normally, one thinks, all right, I'm going to do meditation and I'll get better at it and I'll improve myself and I'll be a better person. And maybe I'll even get enlightened, whatever that is. But maybe I'll find out what it is, right? But then you notice when you're sitting that one of the great desires that arises is the desire to hear the bell. You know it's true.

So this guy goes to the Zen master—a really ardent young man, the most troublesome of all, but the most interesting. He says, "I'm here and I'm really going to do it. I want to practice. How long will it take to get enlightened?"

The Zen master says, "Ten years for you. Ten years."

The young man says, "Ten years? What if I practice really hard and throw myself into it?"

That's when the master says, "Okay, twenty years in your case."

"Twenty years? Isn't there any way I can do this faster?"

"Yeah, for you, thirty years. I can tell."

So we have this idea somehow that the way we're supposed to become something magnificent as a spiritual being or wise person is through some gain, some effort, some making something happen. But it doesn't really work that way. Tennessee Williams wrote, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's something that wants to open in us, but it doesn't necessarily require the kind of gaining and effort as much as it does the willingness to be present.

Because we think in our practice, well, if I do it right, I'll fix my personality. We talk about this, right? You go to therapy, you have a coach, you go to the gym, you work out, you have a good diet, you meditate, and you're going to perfect yourself. How is that project going?

And then you start to realize, okay, I guess it's not really working that way. Or you set your goal: I'm going to meditate, and then I'll never be depressed or lonely or angry or needy or greedy. I'll just be holy and wise. Talk to your family members.

See how their perspective on that is.

So far, we just sit more retreats and so forth.

Now the thing is that we live in a culture that teaches us this. We live in a hurried culture. I remember when, for a time—I think it was partly to save energy—speed limits were lowered to 55 miles an hour everywhere. I don't know who it was, maybe it was under Carter or something like that. But then, you know, for us speed freaks—and myself included—gratefully it was raised again to 65 miles an hour. And now there are places out west in Wyoming and so forth where you can go 80 and 90 miles an hour. Fantastic, you know. This is our culture.

We live in this hurried culture where you're online all the time and people are getting to you and you have to respond right away. Hurry up, hurry up. And so you can do all that stuff so you can have leisure, right? You've got computers so you could get all your work done and have more leisure time. How many people, after you got your computers and your devices, have more leisure time? Raise your hand. Come on, let's be honest. It's not the way our culture works. It's just more, more, more, and quicker and sooner.

And then we have our hurried children. I think about Dr. Elkind, a psychiatrist from Tufts University, who wrote a book about seeing kids who are eight and nine and ten years old with ulcers from stress. I was teaching in China and in Singapore, working with some people from South Korea, and there's a high suicide rate among kids, especially high school and college age, because there is so much pressure. I was giving a talk at the largest psychology department in China, at Beijing Normal University. They asked, "What do we need to talk about?" I said, "Well, why don't we talk about what's happening to the kids?"

But it's not just there, you know. It's here. You've got to prepare for the interviews to get into the right preschool, so you can get your way to Stanford or Harvard. But you've got to start early. And then there are all those things like alphabet cards for your kids and reading programs for infants in the womb. Sing to the kids—don't read to them, please.

Peggy O'Mara, the editor of Mothering magazine, is very wise. She says, "We have a cultural bias against dependency, or against any emotion that indicates weakness. Nowhere is this more tragically evident than the way we push our children beyond their limits and timetables with outside standards." This is when you're supposed to be weaned. This is when you're supposed to be potty trained. This is when you're supposed to do this or that—instead of teaching them to trust themselves. Putting good healthy food on the table instead of saying, "Finish everything on your plate." Give them healthy food and let them learn to regulate themselves.

She says, "Begrudging dependency because it is not independence is like begrudging winter because it's not yet spring. Dependency blossoms into independence in its own sweet time." Our children grow from crawling to walking, babbling to talking, puberty into sexuality. This is the way that life unfolds, and we can trust it.

When you really take a moment to breathe and slow down, you start to feel that it's painful to not honor the natural cycle of things—in your own life, in the life of our children, in the life of the world in which we live.

This is Zorba the Greek: "I remember one morning I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it, and warmed it as quickly as I could. And the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out, and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled. The wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath, in vain."

It needed to be hatched out patiently, and the unfolding of the wings needed to be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled before its time. It struggled desperately and a few minutes later died in the palm of my hand.

Of course, he's a brilliant writer, and he uses that scene from his life to remind us of something really important for us as human beings—the natural unfolding of our children, of our own bodies, of our aging, of our adolescence, of whatever it happens to be, of the work that we care about.

So it turns out that spiritual practice is not about the perfection of yourself. It's really the perfection of love. And in that, this quality of patience is more the quality of listening—the listening heart, of attending, of presence, of living in the mystery of being alive rather than looking for the goal, whether it's spiritual or some other goal you might have.

From T.S. Eliot again, where he writes: "I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope, for hope would be hope of the wrong thing. And wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing. There is yet faith, but the faith and love and hope are all in the waiting. So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing."

Extraordinary language—the stillness, the dancing.

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember the rhythms of life that you were born into. Return to them. Live with that kind of dignity and presence that is your birthright.

So we talk about patience, but really patience is not a very good word. Because patience is like, well, if I wait long enough, something good will happen. People sit in meditation waiting and waiting for something to happen, like waiting for the bus. A better word for it, from Zen Master Suzuki Roshi at San Francisco Zen Center—he said a better word for it is *constancy* rather than patience or impatience, waiting for something.

It's simply a willingness to be present, as we just did in our meditation—to sit and feel this breath, these emotions, these thoughts and stories in the mind, the ones that are skillful and the ones that are unskillful, these experiences in our body that need to be tended to. To begin to trust the unfolding of this body and mind as we become present.

And sometimes, as you know very well, the times when you get impatient or bored or when things seem bad and you want something better to happen, or when they get really difficult—those are the times when you learn the things that the heart needs to know the most.

I was just in Los Angeles and I was in a conversation with a man who had built this very successful and huge real estate empire—half a billion dollars or something, zillions of dollars anyway. It seemed like a lot to me. And he'd quit after a while. He was really successful, on his way to being worth many billions. But he had an autistic child. And he had to stop. There was all the conflict in the family—how do we do this? And what it meant to raise this autistic child.

He looked at me—this child is now about ten years old—and he said, "You know, I have learned more from this child. It changed my life. I was driven. I was lost. And this child required me to quiet myself, to learn what it means to be present for someone in ways that I didn't even know how to do, which then meant I was present for my wife and my other children." And he said, "I can't express to you how important it is to have gone through what at first seemed just a tragedy. But the difficulty of being with this beautiful child—they've brought me my life back."

And we all know this in some way. Some of the hardest things that you've been through are the things that crack your heart open.

So it says in the Tao: "Those who are wise have no mind to fight the Tao. They do not, by their own contrivance, try to help the Tao along." They rest in the present, in the rhythms of life. And this is more the constancy—the willingness to show up with loving awareness, which is the synonym we're using for mindfulness. Where you are, rest in the rhythms of life. And then you drop into your own true nature. Here we are. Wow, what is this that's unfolding?

Now, I could almost tell this as a joke—Carl Jung and Rumi walk into a bar. It's kind of like that. But there's a passage from Carl Jung where he writes: if somebody's trying to get you to do a business deal quickly, and they say you have to sign now—this piece

of property, this building, this stock option is going to disappear like that—or someone else is trying to get you to do something, you should be able to look behind that pressure and see who it is. Because you know who's there: the devil. That was Jung's word.

This is Mara tempting the Buddha and saying, "Hurry up, you've got to do it now."

And of course, this is Rumi: A friend remarks to the prophet, "Why is it I get screwed in business deals? It's like a spell. I become distracted and make wrong decisions." And Muhammad replies, "Stipulate with every transaction that you need three days to make sure. Deliberation is one of the divine and holy qualities. Throw a dog a bit of something, he sniffs it to see if he wants it. Be careful. Sniff with your wisdom nose, then decide."

So this is Carl Jung and Rumi in a bar. Anyway, there you are. But you can hear the truth of it—that sense of "hurry up, do it." And where are we going? Honestly, where are you going? If you step back into a little bit of the bigger picture, we're all going to the same place in a little while. So what's the hurry? Why don't we enjoy it while we're here?

Now, in teaching this, of course there is the slow food movement in France. Thank you to the French for this. And I really do want to love her with a slow hand too. There's always that.

The truth is that I'm a pretty impatient person by temperament. I think quickly. I do things quickly. I don't like being late—sometimes I hate being late if I've promised to be somewhere. I leap up the stairs two at a time, still pretty much. I'm just wired like that, kind of like a hummingbird.

I remember I was teaching at our retreat center in Massachusetts some years ago, leading one of our long three-month silent retreats. We have a two-month silent retreat every winter and spring for about a hundred people. There were a bunch of people who'd come from Europe, and this one guy came in to talk to me. We have these little meditation meetings with students to find out how they're doing and support their practice. He came in and said, "You know, I'm so disappointed." I said, "Oh?" He said, "I've listened to you on CD or cassette tapes or whatever it was back in the day. You just sound so peaceful and mellow. And then I'm watching you here go up and down the stairs, running around. You look like an Italian shoe salesman." Would you like to see our latest fashion?

So when I get mindful and pay attention and notice impatience—it's not just that I'm impatient for the result. There is that, you know, I want the ice cream, or I want the completion of this, I want that to happen. There's that part of it, the grasping. But

there's also something else that I notice: it's hard to be present for certain other feelings, like boredom, or the thought that I'm wasting time. You know that thought? Like you're in traffic and you're wasting... I mean, it's really amazing. I'm here, driving down to the Golden Gate Bridge, and there's been an accident or a traffic jam. I can get impatient as we do. Does it help? Do you get there any faster? My body goes, "I don't want this happening." And I go, "Oh, well, look at that." It's hard to actually pay attention to the frustration or the boredom or the emptiness or the loss of time or all those kinds of things.

It really is a question: Who are we if we're not doing things, if we're not accomplishing something?

I'm a kind of serial doer, so I have that doing problem that many people in this culture have. And it's fine to be able to do stuff—it's actually very satisfying. But it's really hard if that's the only song you can play. Who are we if we're not doing things? Who am I if I'm not doing things?

So instead of patience, perhaps the better word is constancy. And maybe the opposite of impatience is not patience, but somehow presence, or trust, or contentment. These are some of the opposites—to be able to begin to trust where you are and say, here's where I am. I'm in a traffic jam. And all these people, all their cars are blocking my way. My car's blocking theirs. I'm part of the traffic jam. You're blaming all of them, but you forget to look at the car that you've added to it, right?

There's the image of the person riding the train who carries their bags the whole way, who won't put them down—as if you're going to get there faster or something.

"You can pick all the flowers," says Pablo Neruda, "but you can't stop the spring." There's something in that verse, especially in these times of genuine concern for the climate of the earth. But there's also some bigger season that's going on—the earth has its own life and seasons. You can pick all the flowers, but there's something that pushes new life through the cracks in the sidewalk, and that can't be stopped.

Rumi says, "By God, don't be an impatient bystander in this life." Be present for it.

And if you look at little kids, they know this. I was with a little kid who was in a high chair, dropping his spoon over the edge many times to make sure gravity really worked. He's an expert. He's a scientist. Okay, let me see if it works again. And also, he's a psychologist. Let me see if they'll pick it up again. All those things he's studying—a hundred thousand times dropping the spoon off and babbling and trying these things.

So in spiritual life, we might have the sense of progress, of getting better, like in electronics and technology—a smaller, smarter smartphone with more capacities. But the old Zen story describes it differently. A Zen master is there and a student is meditating, and the master says, "Well, what are you doing?" The student says, "I'm meditating so that I can get enlightened. I know that it's possible." And the master picks up a brick and takes out his handkerchief and starts rubbing the brick. The student says, "What are you doing?" The master says, "Well, I'm polishing this brick to turn it into a mirror." The student says, "No matter how you polish it, it's not going to turn into a mirror." And the master replies, "No matter how hard you try in that way, you're not going to turn into the kind of enlightenment that you think you should be. Maybe you should be yourself."

A brick is a brick. We have a certain measure of sorrow. Sorrow is our sorrow. Beauty is our beauty. And when we come into the present, we actually bow to our human incarnation and say, this is it. This is actually it. That's where enlightenment starts—where you are, here and now. And the real openings in spiritual life happen most frequently when we stop trying to make or do or be anything.

I know it for myself. On my own retreats, there gets to a certain point where I just let go and I'm just there. And that becomes in some ways the most beautiful and the most fruitful time. All kinds of things start to open up for me.

And then somebody says, yeah, but what about refugees? What about the war in Syria and South Sudan and the Philippines and Burma? What about continuing racism and injustice?

What about climate change?

The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. But it's pretty hard to bend it these days. It's sort of like it's bending maybe a little bit the other way for a bit. How do we see patience in this? How do we see constancy?

I think there are a few things to say. One is a passage from Thomas Merton that I love to read because it's got so much wisdom in it. He's speaking to a young activist—a frustrated activist—and he says, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps at times result in the opposite of what you expected. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

That somehow you get quiet enough to listen and say, what really matters to me? And this is the direction I'm headed in. It's not given to you to know how it's going to turn out. But what is given to you is to quiet your mind and tend your heart and sense what is the direction that I want to offer of my life to this world. And then whether it's injustice or climate change or racism or warfare, you can act—but you act in a different way.

You act the way Gandhi acted. And what he did, as we all know from the story, is he took one day a week in silence where he didn't do anything. And he's in the middle of taking apart the entire British empire. There are hundreds of thousands of people marching and people getting killed. "Gandhiji, Gandhiji, you must come! People are dying!" And he said, "I'm sorry, it's Thursday. This is my day off. I can't come. I sit in silence on Thursday." And he sat to quiet himself and to listen in some way to a different channel than the channel of doing—to listen: What matters to me? What do I care about in this life? And how can I align my actions and my words to the Tao, to what's really unfolding, and to the deepest values that I carry?

And you might say, well, that's Gandhi. But I was just also with some Silicon Valley people, including some who run these giant companies—Facebook, Google, that kind of thing. I was talking to the CEO of one of them who said, "I'm taking next week off because we really have to do some visioning about where our corporation and our thousands of employees are going. And I can't do that in my office. I just have to go and be quiet for a while. And then I get an intuition, I get a knowing."

We talked about it, and I spoke with him a few days later after he'd been quiet for some time. He said, "Oh yeah, it's all starting to come." And you know this. Sometimes when you're taking a walk is when all of a sudden you understand something. Or in your dreams, if you remember them.

So there's a shift. It's not that you don't care about the world and respond to it and act in an honorable way. But it's a shift from trying to make it happen with your will to instead opening to what your heart tells you is the wisest thing to do from a quiet place—like Gandhi—and letting your actions then follow something that's more timeless.

Ovid says, "Opportunities are everywhere, and so you must always let your hook be hanging. When you least expect it, a great fish will swim by." So it's not that you just do it, but you also open yourself to listen in a different way.

Now it's also useful to begin to study what keeps us from contentment, what keeps us from presence. How many people would be grateful for the day that you had? There are a lot of people in this world still without enough to eat, without shelter, whose lives are

in danger in different ways, or who are sick. If your doctor calls and gives you a diagnosis, and then a few days later you get another call saying, "I'm sorry, it was a mistake"—you go, "Hallelujah, I have my life back!"

I thought I only had a few months to live. And what do you do? You hug your children, you watch the rain, you look at the light on the golden grasses here—the beautiful late evening summer light that happens for us in California. That outer gold shining to our inner gold.

What really matters in the end? There aren't that many things, you know. Did you love well? Maybe. Did you live fully instead of so much in the future and the past? Did you actually live your moments? And maybe did you learn to let go? Because if you don't learn it now, you're going to have a crash course at some point. It's going to come.

So maybe in this quality of constancy or patience, there's really a trust in the seasons of life. "Don't the leaves fall down just like that," a Chinese poet wrote. In the body opening, in the rhythms of being born and of dancing and singing and working and bringing justice and loving and gain and loss, joy and sorrow and tears and delight that make up our human incarnation. To rest in your Buddha nature and say, yes, this is what we were born into, and let me hold it with loving awareness. Let me be present for it. Let me be part of this unfolding.

When my daughter was six years old, my family went on sabbatical to Asia, as we did about every five years, to live for six months or more. I would work on a book or something like that. We lived in one village in Thailand and another in Bali. When she was six, we were living with a Balinese family, and she went to a Balinese dance school, because all the little girls in Bali were dancing as temple dancers—on Jalan Sugriva in Ubud, back in the late 80s.

We were there for some months, and she learned to do the pendet and some other dances. Before we were supposed to leave, she was going to have a recital with some people coming to watch. It was late afternoon when we arrived, and I brought a video camera. They started to prepare her. First they ritually bathed her and washed her, and they did some prayers over her. Then they put on this beautiful sarong, and they wrapped her body in gold silk about twenty times around. Then they put on amazing jewelry. Then they started applying makeup—more makeup than a six-year-old girl could die for having. She was just smiling like this.

And I'm noticing that the light is fading. I'm not going to get a good video of this. It's going to be dark. Then the dance teacher's wife comes over—she had been my daughter's main teacher—and sticks these gold flowers in her hair, adjusting everything. They're just taking their time. And I'm getting more and more impatient, thinking I need to record this thing.

The dance teacher just kind of looked over at me like any good Zen master and smiled, and they kept preparing her.

Finally, at some point, I remembered. I understood something. Because in Bali, when you dance or when you sing or when you make art—and there's so much art in Balinese culture—you don't do it for the approval of other people. You're not doing it for your audience. You do it for the gods.

And the beautiful thing is that it doesn't matter how old you are. If you're eighty years old—and I saw one of the greatest dance masters of Bali who was in her eighties doing extraordinary things—or if you're five or six years old, you are dancing for the gods. And therefore, you deserve the same care and the same gold and the same reverence. The teacher's wife took off her own jewelry and put it all on my daughter.

It was magnificent. I don't have the pictures.

But I have the lesson and the memory, and it's something that I'll treasure.

Who are we doing it for, in some way? We are acting and dancing, moving through our life either just to get it all done, to check the things off our list, to do what we're supposed to do, to accomplish all these things. And okay, I accomplished all this—now what? What is this for? Or are we doing it for the dance itself?

Thomas Merton, again, such a wonderful contemplative and writer, talked about his art as a writer. He said, if you write as a sacred act, or you write for the divine, you'll reach many men and women and bring them joy. If you write for men and women, you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world for a little while. If you write for your own self-promotion, you can read what you've written and after ten minutes you'll be so disgusted you'll wish you were dead. Now it may be a little bit of an exaggeration, but you can hear the difference, can't you? And you know it. You know it in the work you do, in the sandwich that you make for your family, in the tending of someone that you care about, in the way that you move through the world.

This is really what this quality of constancy, of presence, of patience is. It's not something out there, and it's not a hundred thousand mahakalpas away. It's this breath and the hundred thousand moments that make up something beautiful in your own life.

And here we are in this turning of the seasons, as we do in the turning of the spheres. We honor the mystery and the rhythms of life. Sometimes I go about pitying myself, as the Ojibwe saying goes that we all know, when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

So when you sit in meditation, it's not so much to gain something. Yes, you can learn to quiet the mind. You can have insights and visions—beautiful things, some of the time. But sometimes you sit and what you get is the tension in your body or the unfinished business of the heart. The tears that need to be wept but you've been too busy to feel them. Or the longing, or the love that hasn't been expressed, and you realize, "I have to tell that person I love them. I haven't done that."

And you take your seat in the rhythms of birth and death and gain and loss and joy and sorrow as the Buddha that you are. And you say, "Oh yes, this is the rounds of human incarnation." And now let me rest in the heart and live from a place of presence, live from a place of understanding.

The culture doesn't help, as we know. I remember when I was young in Massachusetts, where I lived part of the time, they had the blue laws. The blue laws meant that everything shut down mostly on weekends. Then it was just Sunday. Nothing was open. It was a commercial Sabbath. You couldn't order anything on Amazon on that day because Amazon didn't exist. But basically, the society had decided that Sabbath was actually a healthy thing. We used to have this, you know. And every culture has it—there's a Jewish Sabbath and a Muslim Sabbath.

And there's a Buddhist observance on the full moon, quarter moon, new moon—where everything would stop. Every wise culture knows you have to put down the plow, put down the pen, stop your coding or selling and buying, whatever it happens to be, and take the time to listen. Take the time to stop.

Since society doesn't offer this anymore, your own meditation practice becomes your Sabbath. It becomes your way—in the morning or the evening or whenever works for you—to stop. To tune in, to listen in a deeper way, to find your own rhythm and the rhythm of what is around you.

I'm looking for a story here. This is a story about something bigger, but it could be a story about your meditation too, because sometimes it feels like it's working and sometimes it doesn't—whatever your model or ideal about it might be. But if you're sitting

there and you're bored or frustrated or doubting, thinking it's not working, you can either believe that, or you can say, "Oh, I get to be mindful of boredom, or doubt, or 'not working.'" Oh, doubting mind—that's interesting. Boredom. Because usually when we're bored, what do we do? Open the refrigerator, right? Or go online or something, because we can't tolerate our loneliness or boredom. But if you say, "Oh, it's not working. Hmm, how interesting. I wonder what's happening that it feels like it's not working"—that's just a thought.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an army veteran. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see that he'd tried to wash up before coming to the social service department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. And although he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores. I wanted to get him into rehab, and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets.

"No, ma'am," he said. "All I'd like is a few dollars and some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town."

The shelter had fifty beds—cots really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds and nearly a thousand homeless in our city. This is Santa Rosa, by the way. Winter here in Northern California means cold rain and mud, and even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrates everything. His clothes and the bedroll he'd placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of a book he carried were swollen.

I asked how many times he'd tried rehab.

"Two or three, a long time ago," he said.

"Maybe it's time to try again." I explained that I had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. "Besides," I said, "we're months away from warm weather. What else have you got going on?"

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eyes, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard—impossibly hard. But so was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone.

"Shall I?" I asked.

He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left.

I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors and holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

Sometimes you sit and it doesn't seem like it's working, and then you've got to sit again. You do it because where else are you going? If you can't be here for these moments—for the eyes of the people that you care about, for the colors at dawn if you get up early, for the smell of the bay trees as you walk out into the parking lot and the moon that starts to shine tonight, getting fuller—what is it for?

So this isn't speaking about becoming passive. It's really about your ability to be present so you can respond. So you can plant the seeds that matter to you in this beautiful world, no matter what else is happening.

And again, from Thoreau, he says, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed planted there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

And so you plant your seeds in all the different ways that you do. It's not passive at all. It's about sensing the seasons. And then something beautiful and unstoppable, which is life itself, which is what you are, comes into you. It becomes part of who you are. And there's a dignity and a graciousness and an ease and a peacefulness in it because there's some great trust.

I've been training teachers now for almost forty years, and we've had a whole succession of teacher trainings here. We've just started the latest Spirit Rock teacher training for twenty new retreat teachers, and they're almost all teachers of color because it's been very clear that our community is not only not diverse, but also that somehow we've been collectively unconscious about the need to live in a diverse society and to make it who we are and not just some ideal out there or some other place. So one of the things that seems really important is to have the folks who sit up here and teach really represent everybody, not just some subset of the white community. It's a beautiful group. I'm very excited about it.

But the thing that I said to them, and to my colleagues who are new at training teachers, was this: we really don't train them much. I mean, we give them great lectures and teach them Buddhist history and tools that are helpful—when people are in meditation,

how you can help them open their hearts and quiet their minds. But mostly, they learn it by doing it, like any apprenticeship. They get nervous and they practice and they learn.

And the beautiful thing is that it's completely trustworthy. I've had people come in who have a very deep meditation experience of realization and understanding and good hearts and all kinds of beautiful qualities, but they're shy and timid and they say, "I don't know if I can talk, I don't know what I have to offer." Those are the best kind, actually. They're kind of the real ones. And I watch them flower. And I don't actually have to do much. I just have to provide the support and say, "Yes, you have it."

The beautiful thing is that you have it. All the qualities necessary for awakening, the perfect emotions and the perfect body and the perfect experience—they are what you have. You have all that's needed to awaken. And you have these beautiful qualities in you. So to meditate isn't to have a particular experience, but to remember that you can be present for this life in an entirely different way—in a loving and compassionate and wise way.

Now I've got a lot more stories, but I'm not going to tell them. Maybe one poem from Ikkyu, the Zen poet. He says:

Every day I hear the priests chant the sutras.
They should learn to read the love letter
sent by the wind and the rain, the blossoms and the moon.

So it's not the words in the text, but really the attention to the world that is, as my poet friend Alison Luderman says, "nibbling your ear like a neglected lover." Come back, be present for it.

And being present, by the way—the last thing before I read our final story—is that being present doesn't mean it's going to be pleasant. The idea of "Be Here Now," you know, that book. I just came from visiting Ram Dass, which was really wonderful, in Hawaii. Trudy and I went to spend time with him because he presided over our wedding a year ago. We decided to go back and visit him. He's eighty-five, in his wheelchair for the last eighteen years. Still aphasia—he can speak, but it's limited some, although his mind is very clear. But he's just all love.

He just looks at you and says, "I love you. I love this life. I love you too. And I love you, and you. And I love this day. And I love the ceiling. I love the exit sign." I mean, he's really funny about it. "I love the floor." He just can't stop loving everything. That part is really wonderful.

And there he says, he looks at you and he says, "You have it. You are it." It's not like you have to be somebody else. No one's ever been like you before in this whole vast galaxy. So you might as well dance.

Anyway, all right. So I have a story as the last one to read, which is from one of my favorite children's books. My daughter said to me, "Dad, you can't read that story." I said, "Why not?" She said, "You're too impatient. It's just not right." So with that caveat, I will read it to you anyway. Maybe my daughter will be patient with me, and maybe not. But that's not my practice.

This is from Arnold Lobel, who's written a series of children's books called *Frog and Toad*. Many of you will know this, and if you don't, they're wonderful children's books. So this is a chapter out of *Frog and Toad*, and you can picture the drawings that come with it.

Frog and Toad are good friends.

Frog was in his garden. Toad came walking by. "What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said.

"Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," said Toad.

"Well, here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog, "and soon you will have a garden."

"How soon?" asked Toad.

"Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. "Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing."

Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "Now seeds, start growing."

Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, "Seeds! Seeds! Listen! Start growing!"

Frog came running up the path. "What is all this noise?" he asked.

"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.

"You are shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow."

"My seeds are afraid to grow?" asked Toad.

I mean, you can hear what good medicine this is for parents, not to speak of the children.

"Of course," said Frog. "Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them. Let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."

That night, Toad looked out his window. "Drat," said Toad.

My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark.

Toad went out to his garden with some candles. "I will read the seeds a story," said Toad. "Then they will not be so afraid."

Toad read a long story to his seeds. All the next day, Toad sang songs to his seeds—in the rain, you can see it raining. And all the day after, Toad read poems to his seeds. And all the next day, Toad played music for his seeds. You can see him playing his violin.

Toad looked at the ground. The seeds still did not start to grow. "What shall I do?" cried Toad. "These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"

Then Toad felt very tired and he fell asleep.

"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. It was morning. "Look at your garden."

Toad looked at his garden. Little green plants were coming up out of the ground. "At last!" shouted Toad. "My seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"

"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.

"Yes," said Toad, "but you are right, Frog. It was very hard work."

This is your Buddhist sutra for the evening. That's right.

If you do anything with this talk, if you listen and it reminds you of something important to you, pay attention also to when you're impatient. Study impatience. It's actually a kind of interesting thing to get curious about. What is this? What keeps you from joy or contentment or being present just with the way things are? Notice the stories that come, or the feelings in the body.

And if you bring loving awareness to that—rather than looking for, or trying to become, patient—notice the other stuff and be patient with that, be present for it. Some very interesting things will happen in a few minutes. Well, how soon, actually? Soon enough, right?

So many other stories, but I think that's enough.

So my friends, says Wendell Berry: every day do something that won't compute and won't count. Love the world. Work out of love.

Work for nothing. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Go with your love to the fields. Lie down in the shade. Rest your head.

So thank you, Gary. Thank you all for your kind attention. It's really a pleasure.

CHAPTER 75

The Essence of Buddhist Psychology - Daylong, Part 2 Afternoon

Jack Kornfield · 3h30

> *In this afternoon session of the daylong retreat, Jack Kornfield presents a comprehensive framework for understanding mental health through the lens of Buddhist psychology. Drawing from the Abhidhamma tradition, he explains how consciousness arises through the six sense doors and how mental states—either rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in wisdom, love, and generosity—shape our experience. This map offers a radical reorientation: mental health is the capacity to be present with experience through mindfulness and loving awareness, while mental suffering stems from our inability to tolerate experience without grasping or aversion.*
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> *Kornfield addresses trauma with particular depth, explaining how good trauma work requires establishing resources of well-being before approaching difficult material, allowing emotions to release through the body, and creating safe containers for storytelling. He shares moving examples from his work with combat veterans, refugees, and at-risk youth, demonstrating how ritual acknowledgment and compassionate witnessing facilitate healing.*
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> *The teaching culminates in exploring intention (cetanā) as the heart of karma—both the mindful pause that transforms moment-to-moment reactions and the long-term vows that set the compass of our lives. Through guided forgiveness practice and a blessing cord ritual, participants are invited to discover that awareness itself is timeless and free, and that our deepest nature is loving awareness capable of holding all of life's joys and sorrows with equanimity and grace.*

I hope you had a good lunch break. And I'm also grateful that the air has cleared compared to earlier this morning, so you could go out.

How are you doing after all this morning's meditation and teachings? Any comments or questions before we start?

One in the back.

"Jack, I've always wondered—this is the second one of these that you've taught that I've been to—and it's not a great question, but I'm just curious. In my reading of the sutras, and by the way, I'm no scholar, I never saw anything about the Abhidhamma men-

tioned. And so I wonder where that comes from. Is that a result of the 500-year period after the Buddha's death of the flowering of Buddhism? Is that something that Nagarjuna was involved in? Is it something that's written about somewhere else? I never understood what that was exactly, except for the chain of dependent origination."

So for those who might not understand that question, because it comes from an understanding of Buddhist history and texts, sometimes the word "Buddhist psychology" has been used to describe one part of Buddhist teachings called the Abhidhamma or Abhidharma, which is the third of three sections of the ancient Buddhist texts.

One section concerns the lives of the monks and nuns and the way they should live—the whole thing about community. A second, which is the biggest section, the sutras, are either the teachings that were given by the Buddha or, in greater majority, are records of dialogues where the Buddha would be wandering and someone would come up and say, "I just lost my business," or "I met this yogi who said that if I practice in this way, I'll get enlightened," or "My child just died, help me." And in those dialogues—or "I'm a prince, the kingdom next door wants to make war on us, what should I do?"—a good part of those texts are his responses to people's concerns or sufferings or possibilities.

And then the third group called the Abhidhamma or Abhidharma is a very complex mapping of the different possible states of mind. Remember what I read from those 500 feelings? Well, the Abhidhamma has 108 different states of mind, 52 mental factors, and 28 different kinds of experiences of elements in the body and the senses. It maps all these out and then does quite complex maps of the relationship in one moment of how a moment of perception arises with feeling and intention and consciousness and history and response.

So my best understanding is that that third section was not written down until the third great council, or one of the great councils of the Buddhist following, that happened several hundred years after the death of the Buddha. And the story that's told is that those were teachings that the Buddha gave by going up to heaven when he was still alive and teaching his mother who had died, giving her all these special teachings. And then she later recited them to the monks who were in that third century after his death, and they wrote them down.

Could be. But it could also be that they combed through the teachings and said, "Let's make this more systematic." And they all liked to make lists—the three characteristics and the four noble truths and the five spiritual faculties and the six paramitas and the seven factors of enlightenment and the twelve links of dependent origination. They

were list makers. And it was an oral tradition, so it made it easier to write down. So this was like list makers gone berserk, basically, with huge numbers of complex lists. Apparently it was written down several centuries later.

And in some places it's considered the highest teachings. In others it's not; in others it's considered derivative of the earlier teachings. But of course people always have opinions about things. And so when you go into the Buddhist temples and among the scholars, they are—shocking to say—sometimes rather opinionated. They have their views about when and where and what's more important. Not unlike the rest of us.

So that's the historical record as far as I know. What we're working with today is a very different meaning of the word "Buddhist psychology"—taking the compass of the teachings as a whole and looking at what are the essential principles as a science of mind or psychology, and how we might employ them and use them in human happiness and human suffering.

So thanks for that question.

And one of the things that's true in China, certainly on the coast, which is the wealthiest part—I was in Shanghai and Beijing and a couple of other places in Jiangxi province—is that now many parts of China have become much wealthier and quite prosperous. It's kind of extraordinary to see in one generation, from primarily bicycles and little low buildings to high-rises and skyscrapers, a road system that's really the equivalent of our superhighways around the country, people driving great big SUVs and their Mercedes and BMWs and fancy cars. It's become very modern in a very short time, with a tremendous amount of wealth in parts of China.

And people are recognizing that, all right, I have money—what else is there? I'm not so happy in some cases. There's a kind of stress, both in the society and especially among young people. I was in Singapore and then talking with people from Korea. There's a lot of suicide among young people, because with one child, parents are pushing them to succeed and do well. And the poor kids feel like they're being oppressed in some way by expectations.

So what I found in China was, just as we talked about at the very beginning, that the outer developments now aren't enough. And there are at least some seeds of growing interest in reclaiming these traditions. The little project I have is called Returning the Treasure, bringing things back to temples and places like that.

Your question points to the fact that we could use this here in this culture, and certainly in the online world from all those big companies. They're interested. I've done trainings for the top executives at Salesforce, for example. Google has Search Inside

Yourself, and I've done work with Meng, who's one of the people that started a big program of mindfulness through Google. I've done training for the very highest level of people at Apple.

I think there are two things to say. One is that it's actually hard to bring these values and principles fully alive in an intense business environment. The way capitalism is currently constructed, the way the markets are—there's an enormous pressure to make money as fast as you can, bottom line. And if you don't, you're thrown out, basically. The shareholders or someone will throw you out. I've found, working with the CEOs of some of the top companies in America, that they're actually much more amenable to this when they retire. But when they're actually doing it, it's so intense.

It's not so for all of them. Some of them need it in the middle. There's a YouTube video if you're interested in this. I had a conference and a long conversation with Bill Ford, who runs Ford Motors. He called in 2008, when the economy was melting down for the Great Recession, and he said, "I can't sleep." He'd been doing Buddhist practice for quite a while. "I'm afraid that we're going to lose the whole industry, including my grandfather's company on my watch. Do you have anything that could help?"

So he began to do much deeper mindfulness training, and it helped him a lot. He describes this in that YouTube video. But that's kind of unusual—that he's really still in the saddle. So one thing is that people are so at the mercy of market forces in business that it's a little bit... yes, they put mindfulness in and it's a nice little gloss on things, but to have it really be incorporated is going to take longer.

And I think the big change is taking place because we now have social and emotional learning and mindfulness training in schools. As kids learn this from early on—yes, the business schools are doing it. I got a call from Stanford Business School some years ago from one dean and a senior professor, who said, "Could you come down and help us?" I said, "What do you want?" He said, "Well, we get the most accomplished students in the country, really fantastic students, but they're also very ambitious. They come here and immediately they're trying to figure out what company they'll work for and what their internship will be. They're envisioning how they're going to get paid, how it's going to grow, how they'll make a fortune in Silicon Valley—people's dreams. And by the time two years are over, they've kind of lost touch with themselves. They're so driven."

I listened and I said, "So what you're asking for is something like soul retrieval?" He said, "Yeah, yeah, that's right. That's what we need."

So I went down to Stanford Business School and did a training for a weekend with some CEO friends and others. They're beginning to put it in, but it would have to be really woven into the curriculum. And I think the place it really matters is with younger children.

The other thing I'm involved with is a group of neuroscientists, and we are looking at ways to actually develop technological products—virtual reality, augmented reality experiences—that train people in compassion. Looking at the research, this seems possible. So it's very early in the game, but what's true is that we have this technological world, and it's rewiring our children's brains. Two-year-olds don't read a book anymore; they swipe a regular book to see if the pictures will change, because they've had their iPad since the crib. In some ways this is very creative, and in other ways... well, when we have our teen retreats here—I'm going on about this because it's such an interesting question—one of the most important rituals, one of the most transformative things, happens as the retreat starts.

We have a big basket and a particular special chant that we do, a kind of ritual. Then the teens will each place their smartphone into the basket for a week. It's a little like surgery. Some anesthesia is needed because it's so wired into them. They sleep with it under their pillow. It's so much a part of their lives. And what does it mean to have a week's experience where you're not online all the time?

Your question points to many interesting things. I do think that with all the research, mindfulness is growing and will make a difference in our culture. And it's up against some very big forces. But these are interesting developments.

One last question. "I work with people with depression. Most have a sitting practice. What they describe to me is more of a resistance, like a dissociation practice—staying on the breath so they don't have to feel. When you were talking about the feeling foundation of mindfulness and tolerating, what do you suggest when they're so afraid of feeling?"

Well, there are a couple of things. First, which you probably know, it would be worth reading material from folks like Zindel Siegel, who has written extensively about using MBCT, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, with depression. The stories people tell themselves are really critical, as you would know working with this.

For me, when somebody comes who can't tolerate their feelings—and this really connects to what we'll talk about shortly—in part what we're addressing is trauma. That's the origin of most of those feelings. Good trauma work requires considerable intelligence, because there's bad trauma work out there too. But good trauma work recog-

nizes that trauma is carried in the body and in the nervous system, as well as in emotions and stories. Before you can approach it without re-traumatizing people, you need to help them find resources of well-being.

The very first thing, whether for depression or trauma, is helping them find whatever gives them even a little glimmer of well-being. It might be physical—your feet on the floor, what's the safest place in your body, what posture works for you, how can you calm yourself a little. Or if they can't do that, it might be asking: can you remember a time in your life when you felt safe and loved? Maybe at your grandmother's house, or at your uncle's farm, or somewhere. Let that image and that whole scene come to you. Feel what that's like in your body.

All right, now let's approach the anxiety that's there with the depression, or the grief—but only a little bit, so it doesn't overwhelm you. And then go back. Okay, you felt a little, a few tears came. It's scary. Let's do a little bit of it. Name it. All right, now come back. Feel your feet and ground yourself, or remember your grandmother, whatever it happens to be. Feel the well-being and go back and forth, so there's a basis for approaching what's difficult. You can do it a little step at a time. This is part of training to increase that window of tolerance.

I also think, you know, people are smart. We're also fools—Zen Master Ryokan, Japan's most beloved poet, wrote: "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change." So we're both. But people are smart in the sense that you can explain to them that part of what keeps their depression locked in is the inability to tolerate certain feelings—loneliness, anxiety, emptiness, unworthiness, whatever it happens to be. You can tell them it's possible not only to learn to tolerate these feelings, but that in holding them, they can transform. And then: here, let's do a little practice to learn to do it step by step.

So I'm very respectful of resistance, which relates to other questions we've had. It's there because it's trying to protect us.

And so you want to say, this has been a value, and it's helped you. And now you can say, "Thank you for trying to protect me. And let's see if we can expand who we are beyond the fears of it." I don't know if that's helpful.

Alright. So why don't we sit for five minutes. And just kind of let the words pass and reconnect with the stillness. Come back gently to your own breath and body, just here and now.

As you sense the breath, let the sounds and sensations and other experiences that are in the background rise and fall like waves of the ocean. And when one of the waves becomes strong, then turn your loving awareness toward that as if to bow to it, acknowledge and name it gently, and feel it move through the body and mind as a wave. And when it's passed or you're at ease with it, then again feel the breath.

So we will do some other practices this afternoon—an equanimity practice, perhaps a forgiveness practice, a couple of other practices. Just to start here.

In Western psychology, there's so much emphasis on psychopathology and the medical model—what's your diagnosis and so forth—certainly in clinical psychology. And you know where clinical psychology came from, perhaps worth saying. Before World War II, most of psychology was research psychology. But then when all the troops came back who were shell-shocked and with trauma, there weren't enough psychiatrists to go around, and the field of clinical psychology grew actually in response to the veterans coming back. And again, it's been mostly oriented toward pathology and diagnosing people and so forth.

One of the things that's noteworthy both in psychiatry and psychology is that while it's called the mental health field, there's almost no focus on mental health. It's all on mental disorder. You go in and you train and learn about all these disorders, and that's really the emphasis of it.

So you have handed out to you today a paper that has a map from Buddhist psychology of mental health. Here is how to understand it.

On the left hand side are all the things that make up our human experience: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, bodily perceptions, and mental perceptions—thoughts, feelings, and intuitions. There are six senses. The mind is considered a sixth sense door because it knows thoughts and feelings. Does anybody have anything other than this in their life? Raise your hand. You can have your money back.

This was actually taught in relationship to a kind of famous dialogue the Buddha had with somebody about the world. The Buddha said, "I'll teach you what the world is made of. What your world is made of." And it's made of these six things: sight, sound, taste, smell, bodily perception, and mental perception.

Then along with these six things, if you look on the right hand side, are the six flavors of consciousness that arise with them—eye and ear and nose, tongue, body consciousness, and so forth. Which is to say, for us to experience something, there's both the sense experience and the consciousness which knows it. Consciousness is called the knowing faculty.

So if you have somebody who just died and you're there with their body, it's still warm, their eyes are open, light hits the retina, probably neural firing going to the visual cortex in the brain—but there's something missing, which is consciousness. They're not seeing anything, even though all the physical things are happening. What's needed for us to have our human experience is sense experience and the consciousness which receives it. That's pretty clear?

Okay. Then it turns out that between the sense experience and the consciousness is a whole array of mental states. And if we take them from that question that was asked before about the Abhidharma, Abhidhamma, and so forth, this list comes from the fifty-two most common mental states.

And what the mental states are is that they determine the relationship of consciousness to experience. There are some common ones that are present in most every moment—feeling tone and so forth. But most of them, of the fifty-two, are divided into two halves: the healthy side and the unhealthy side.

The unhealthy side is described as the three roots of greed, hatred, and delusion—which is somewhat old-time Victorian language. What it means is that we have a sight or a sound, and with greed, we attach and we want more of it and we grasp it. With hatred, there's aversion, fear—we push it away, we don't want to experience it. And with delusion, we don't see it clearly. We space out or we're somewhere else.

When we're reacting to experience from these three roots, they give rise to worry, envy, rigidity, agitation, grasping, self-centeredness, fear, avarice, shamelessness, dullness, closed-mindedness, confusion, misperception—all these kinds of unhealthy states. And the stronger they are, the greater the mental distress.

You could read the whole DSM listing of mental problems, and they are when worry turns into paranoia and fear, or delusion turns into whether it's delusions of grandeur or seeing things that aren't there. Psychiatric problems of great delusion, where greed gives rise not only to avarice but then to addiction, shamelessness, sociopathy, confusion, and so forth. All the things that we consider mental problems grow out of our inability to be present with our experiences, and then we're either pushing them away or grasping them in some unhealthy fashion.

Now, these states are reciprocally inhibited by an opposite set of states, which is to say that there's a whole variety of healthy states. When the healthy states arise, the unhealthy ones disappear. The three roots of the healthy states are these: instead of delu-

sion, there's wisdom or clarity. Instead of hatred and aversion and fear, there's love or a sense of connectedness. Instead of grasping, there's generosity or gratitude—instead of trying to hold on to things, there's a sense of appreciation.

This means that experience arises and we can appreciate it. We see it clearly. There's a sense of love and well-being. And from those roots, which get fostered through mindfulness, there grows graciousness, modesty, insight, flexibility, joy, equanimity, kindness, adaptability—a whole variety of other healthy mental states.

In a certain way, all of Buddhist psychology is to help us see what mental states are present, and if they're unhealthy ones, to see them clearly and release them by holding them with compassion or forgiveness, letting them go, and cultivating healthy states of mindfulness, generosity, gratitude, love, and clarity. Those then give what neuroscientists have shown is adaptability, emotional resilience, pliancy of mind—all kinds of good things come from this.

So this is really a map that says: if you want to know what mental health is, it is the ability to be present for life experience with mindfulness and graciousness and ease, neither resisting nor being caught up in fears nor lost in confusion, but with clarity and presence. If you want to know what mental illness and mental difficulties are, they are rooted in our inability to tolerate and be with experience without either grasping and getting addicted or pushing it away. And the most important thing is that there are a whole variety of trainings and ways to move us from unhealthy to healthy states.

Sometimes people will ask, "This is nice for meditation, but what about when there's much more severe pathology?" If you're interested, there's a book by Ed Podvoll called *Recovering Sanity*. He was a psychiatrist who used these principles with psychotic patients and developed what are now a few centers called the Windhorse Centers. The basic gist of his approach is that even when somebody is delusional or psychotic, there will be moments of clarity there. He said you have to wait for those moments when you can really connect with that person and let them know what's going on, and expand those moments until they start to begin to trust the sanity of their mind as well as the insanity.

Part of how his places were started—I had some folks come and visit me to talk about founding these centers—involved a few people whose names I won't use, but they're enormously wealthy. They had children in their family who were psychotic or had psychiatric problems. They said, "We gave them medication. In some cases the medication didn't help. The side effects of obesity, or drooling, or just losing their soul

were too draconian. Can you help?" Ed was really a founder of this work, creating places—it took a lot of resources—to be with these people and help them find themselves again. That was pretty interesting.

Or, as I mentioned, there's DBT—Dialectical Behavior Therapy developed by Marsha Linehan—that works with mindfulness and builds the capacity to be with distress for borderline personality and other quite difficult conditions.

But even in the simplest way, when I teach with Dan Siegel, a colleague and neuroscientist from UCLA, people will come to him with depression. And he listens. Sometimes it's situational depression because someone died or circumstances changed. Sometimes it's a kind of ongoing depression that's been there for a while. He'll take out his prescription pad and write a prescription that says: "45 minutes to one hour of strong aerobic exercise, six times a week. Come see me in three months."

And more than half of the people who are depressed and come see him three months later are fine—because they've been sitting at their desks or their computers, moping or unable to work, unable to move in some way because of how their life has been organized. When they actually get their body moving—no meditation, just pay attention a little bit—for more than half of them, that changes everything.

This also says something about our culture and our mental health system, that we've forgotten some really basic things. And all of these approaches, like the RAIN practice we just did, are ways of recognizing and appreciating or understanding, then investigating and not identifying—moving us from what's unhealthy to what are healthy states.

Now this is especially important in trauma, which was brought up by the question just a little bit ago. Trauma is a very complex thing. It's held in the body. There are all these emotions. There are stories and social needs woven into it. All of these are present together.

So good trauma work begins—and you can look at the work of Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing or EMDR—by tracking how trauma is held in the body. But even before that, by establishing some resource for that person so that they're stable enough to approach the trauma without getting re-traumatized. Then they can begin to tell their story, they can begin to activate those emotions. Because what happens in trauma, basically, is that something terrible happens, you go into fight, flight, or freeze, and you can't bear what's happening to you, so you dissociate from it to survive and get through it. But if it's not released, it remains in your body. It can stay there for years or decades.

We see this with veterans who come back when they haven't had good trauma work. That becomes their demons. I remember talking to a vet who'd come on a retreat. He sat and relived the firefights, the battles—while sitting on his cushion. The things that used to be in his nightmares and wake him up every night. But now he was reliving them consciously. And he said, "Because I did, I could come to terms with them in an entirely different way."

So there's the body part of unlayering. There's the tolerance of the emotions, little by little. And then there is often the storytelling.

I think of this woman who came here on a retreat, who'd been in the war in Kosovo. She'd been injured and she'd seen terrible things. And she said, "Nobody has really heard my story. People don't want to hear your war stories." I said, "Well, I'm interested, but we're on a silent retreat. Could you do this for me? Could you write some of your stories? I'll read them and then we'll talk."

Okay.

Three days later, she comes in and hands me eighty pages of handwritten material. I think to myself, "I hope she can write well, because I've got to read all this." It turns out that not only did she tell the stories of suffering and pain from that war zone, but she had fallen in love with someone, and half of it was a love story woven between the firefights and battles. I'm up at night turning the pages to see what's going to happen next.

Or when I've worked with vets coming back—done some of that work with my colleagues Michael Meade and Luis Rodriguez, retreats for returning vets, especially combat vets—one of the things that happens is that we create a safe enough place and do some rituals to make it feel really safe for them to tell their stories. They can't tell them to their families. Because here's the issue, as they would say in their language:

First, I can't tell you what I saw. It was so horrific. How can you talk about dismembered bodies and blown-up children? Nobody wants to hear that.

But then there's something worse. I can't tell you what I had to do.

And that is what the Irish call a *geis* on your soul—a weight that you carry because you were in a certain position as a warrior.

where you had to do things that are really inhuman. And you need somehow to find forgiveness for that.

The fact that these warriors coming back can be together is powerful. We start by telling myths of warriors returning—in Africa, in Tibet, the Mayan warriors—because every culture has stories about how to bring warriors back and reconnect them with their lives. This isn't just a modern problem. And then these men realize, "Oh, it's not just me. This is the archetypal dilemma of a warrior. How do you come home?"

I could tell you some very powerful stories. But here's how it works: they tell their stories. Often we have them write a little story or a poem. And in the end, we invite their families to come in after a week. The men stand up and read or tell some of their story. And we have a ritual. We say, "We have heard your story. We bear witness to your suffering. And now, as a warrior, we welcome you back—not into the life of a warrior, but into the life of the home and the life of the land." We do a whole ritual. "We welcome you home. We see who you are. We see what you've suffered."

To be able to do that is an extraordinary thing. It's a kind of redemption for them. When you think about Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been at least a couple million people who were in the "theater of war" there. And mostly they come back and are disgorged by a bus onto a street corner—"Okay, go home"—without any place to understand what they still carry in their lives.

So this is giving you a sense of how trauma work holds and works. You need the stability and grounding so they don't get overwhelmed. You need a sacred or safe container. You need to allow for the emotional release, the storytelling—but more than anything, what's there needs to come out of the body.

It's like this story I use of the man who wrote to the IRS and said, "I haven't been able to sleep since I cheated on my taxes last year. So I've enclosed an anonymous cashier's check for $3,000. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

And that's how we are. We do things a little at a time. For good trauma work, you have to understand that kind of gradual ability to release trauma. It grows as the capacity for presence comes—resilience and regulation, expanding the window of tolerance. All of those things.

But it's not just people coming back from battle. Here, let me read you something:

"Am I gorgeous?" my child asks, drawing the word out like pulled taffy. "Yes," I say, "you are." The pink and teal dress is probably made of some highly flammable material, an approximation of satin. Pudgy fingers decorated with pink polish trace the sequins on the bodice. "I love this." A giant pair of bubblegum pink wings flap slowly. Little feet dance in

sparkly red slippers. "I'm just like a real princess." "Yes," I say, "you are." Curly hair, joyful smile, flawless skin. This child, as all children, is the epitome of childhood beauty. This child—my son.

He's four years old and prefers to wear dresses. Maybe it's a phase, maybe not. Even as I wonder how I produced such an angelic-looking creature, I wish he would put on some pants and go back to play with toy tractors—not because it matters to me, it doesn't—but because I'm already hearing in my head the name-calling he'll face in kindergarten. Many adults are already disturbed by the dresses and utter apologies when they realize he's not female. This culture wants little boys to dream only of baseball, trucks, and trains. This culture has no room for little boys who want to be gorgeous.

He picks up a parasol a neighbor gave him and opens it jauntily over his shoulder. "Am I beautiful?" he asks.

I sweep him into my arms and plant a kiss on his cheek. "Always," I say. "Always."

You can feel the tenderness when you hear that story. You know what it's like.

In the years of leading men's retreats, we'll do a council in the evenings where men listen to each other. Sometimes in the middle of the retreat, we'll make a theme of fathers and sons, and people will hold a talking piece and tell a story about that. The father wounds come out then. But usually we'll also take an evening and ask men to tell their sexual history. Just for those of you who aren't men in the room—men are really confused. There's quite a bit of suffering. It's not "Whoopee, let's talk about sex." It's more like, "Oh my God, here are the mistakes, here are the difficulties, here's my confusion about it." And then when the gay men talk, the level of suffering that has been in many people's lives is enormous.

So there's that story, just telling you what might happen to those human beings. They just come out as a baby and say, "Here's who I am." And the culture says, "I'm sorry. Your skin is the wrong color. Your orientation is wrong." And then you get mistreated, sometimes in really terrible ways. Yet we come with this original innocence.

So here we are, training ourselves in a deeper capacity to be present for the ten thousand joys and sorrows of the world. Acknowledging what's here, making the space of loving awareness so that our awareness is bigger than the experience itself. Noticing where it is in the body, being able to name it. If fear comes, you name it: "Oh, fear. Anxious. Fear. Fear." Maybe it takes you fifty or a hundred times, but at some point fear will come and you'll go, "Oh, fear—I know you. Yeah, okay, fear. Let's see what happens." And you lose your fear of it.

Or maybe, as I said, you're restless or you're bored or you're lonely. And so you want to tolerate your loneliness. "Don't abandon your loneliness," writes the poet Hafiz. "Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few ingredients can."

So you sit here and you're lonely or bored. What to do? Be bored. Be lonely. Let it cut more deeply, so to speak. Let yourself think, "Okay, I'll die of boredom. I'll die of restlessness." Because if you don't, you know what happens? You're home and you get a little bored or a little lonely. What do you do? You open the refrigerator. You go online. You do anything because you can't be with yourself.

To be able to tolerate your loneliness or boredom or your grief or your desire—and desire isn't a bad thing. There are healthy and unhealthy desires. It can be addictive, but it also can be healthy. The thing is, it's part of you, part of being a human being. It's like the poet Alison Luterman wrote—it's kind of like, "I hid the chocolate chip cookies because I'm on a diet. Meanwhile, I'm the only person in the entire galaxy who knows where those chocolate chip cookies are hidden." That's how desire is. You can't remove it from your body, but you can see it and you can understand it.

And grief is really important.

We talked about how Malidoma and the Lakota Native Americans see grief as a doorway to what's sacred or holy—that people who are grieving are said to have more powerful prayers because they're connected with the sacred in the world in some way.

I think about retreats I've done with kids coming out of street gangs, again with Luis Rodriguez, this wonderful Latino poet, Michael Meade, a mythologist, and Malidoma. We're going to teach them meditation, do poetry, mythology. And these guys come and they sit in the back with their hoods over their heads and their hats turned back, and they're like, "Man, you're giving me a poem? I'm out on the street. People have got nine millimeters. You got something better than that?" This is tough.

So we'll say, "You know, we can't even begin to have a conversation because there are too many people in this room who haven't been acknowledged, who are with us. So would you go out in the parking lot and pick up a stone for every young person you know who's been killed?" We light a candle and put it in the middle of a table—it's a very simple ritual. And when you put the stone by the candle, just say their name. "This is for Tito, and this is for RJ, and this is for Homegirl," and so forth.

Some of these kids come back and their hands have lots of stones. No young person should know that many dead people. And they'll put them down, and there's a reverence when they say the name of their homies who were killed. Then we sit back down

and all of a sudden the hoods come off and their eyes are open. They say, "Okay, this is a place where we can talk about what happened. These people aren't afraid to talk about it."

In a way, this is what we're learning in meditation—a kind of equanimity and balance, an ability to be present for what is here, to make the space in heart and mind with loving awareness that says, "Yes, we can do this."

As we practice, the research from Alan Wallace and Cliff Saron shows a growing ability to be in balance with all things. Cliff is at UC Davis, Alan Wallace at Santa Barbara. There grows a kind of equanimity, an ability to be at ease with birth and death, joy and sorrow—maybe even with the mystery of things.

The image that's used is this: if you put a spoonful of salt in a cup of water, it will taste very salty. But if you put that same spoon of salt in a pond or a lake, the water still remains pure and clear. In the same way, you can make your mind more spacious like sky, like time and space. And when you do that, when your loving awareness expands, it gives you a kind of great freedom.

Here's a story from a woman named Maria who works as a nurse in the emergency room of a local hospital. She describes how she's learned to use the art of resting in spacious or loving awareness:

"Sometimes it's not too busy and I can work on automatic—check on a patient or do the paperwork while my mind drifts off to think about a million other things. Then we might get a whole crowd of incoming patients: accidents, heart attacks, asthma emergencies. I do my part, but I'm also tuned into the whole of what's going on. I've learned to open the awareness. It's as if my mind gets spacious and still, present, sensitive to what's needed, yet kind of detached at the same time. I guess it's like that flow state that athletes talk about. I'm in the middle doing all the right things, yet some part of me is just watching it all, silent.

"It happens more these days, not just at work. And when I do my meditation practice, it gets stronger. I had a big fight with my teenage son. In the middle of it, I could feel my body tightening, how right I thought my view was. Just feeling that, I relaxed, shifted to the space of awareness, and things opened up. I was saying no, but I could also feel all the love underneath, and how these were just our roles and we had to play them well. And behind it, it was all spacious and all okay."

When we learn to rest in awareness, there's both caring and silence. There's a big space to allow life, to respond in the dance of life. And yet there's all this freedom that starts to open up as well.

And so this is the growth of equanimity.

A few lines from Mary Oliver, where she writes, "For years and years, I tried just to love my life." That line alone is about half of spiritual practice. "And then the butterfly rose weightless in the wind. Don't love your life too much. And she vanished into the world."

And so this is kind of that balance. T.S. Eliot says, "Teach us to care and not to care." To both be present for life in an intimate and a caring way, but also to realize, like Issa wrote of his daughter, that it is like dew, that it vanishes. And that this is also the truth of our life.

Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way. He said, "When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

And so you know who that one person is. As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi." But you become that person as you train in this capacity. And it also allows you then to not just be caught in the current drama, but to have some vast perspective, the turning of the seasons.

You all know that phrase from the Ojibwe: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

And it is really so mysterious. A friend of mine who's a hospice director was also trained as a teacher in Buddhist meditation. He said one morning he had an old guy from an Italian family who was in his mid-eighties and close to dying from cancer. And the family came in and said, "We have a dilemma. We've got to go see our father." They were in their fifties. My friend said, "Well, what's the dilemma?" They said, "Well, his younger brother, who was seventy-nine, just died yesterday in a car accident. And our dad is so close to dying that we don't know whether we should tell him or not. Maybe it will disturb him. We want him to be peaceful. What should we do?"

And my friend said, "Well, let's go and visit your father and maybe we'll get a sense of what's right." This is a very good mindful move. Let's not make up our minds. Let's actually go and pay attention to what's happening.

So they went in the room. "How are you today, Dad?" Very weak, you know, close to the end. They're talking to him. "Nice to see you again," whatever. And then he says, "Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, my brother—he died yesterday." They said, "Well, how do you know that?" And he said, "Oh, I've been talking to him all night."

What do you make of that, folks? This is our life. It's really mysterious. And the spaciousness of awareness says, "Oh, human incarnation. We're going to have some pain. We're going to have gorgeous beauty. We're going to have love."

We're going to have fear. This is what human incarnation is. And we can make something magnificent of it.

Equanimity is that capacity to be present for praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, fame and disrepute—and to know it's all part of the game in vastness. But it's not who you are. You are the space of awareness itself that witnesses it. And that connects you with everything when you get quiet.

As Alice Walker wrote, she said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was. And it came to me—that feeling of being part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried. I ran all around the house." In fact, when it happens, you can't miss it. And we all know it—making love, or walking in the mountains, or listening to an amazing piece of music, or taking some sacred medicine, or sitting there with someone when they die or when they're getting born. And you go, "Whoa, this is pretty wild."

I was talking with my wife, Trudy, who had a huge mystical experience when her daughter was born. She was alone for hours in labor. It was back in the day when people were not all that careful—a while in medicine when babies were thought to not have any feelings, so you didn't have to anesthetize them. Animals don't have any feelings. Give me a break. You do meditation, you can go back and feel what it was like to be in the womb when you get very quiet. All the way back, those memories are in your body.

But there she was, all alone, 21 years old, long labor, tremendous pain, frightened some. And then she said, "Something remarkable happened. All of a sudden, my mind just exploded and it became vast like the sky. And I felt not myself giving birth, but that I was women. I was all the women on the earth that had given birth and that always had and always will, and that it wasn't personal at all." And then she said, "I was shocked. That means walking down the street, everybody I saw came out of a woman's body." They kind of forget that, right? I mean, it's wild. You were this little thing and you

grew up in there. Okay, I'm here. It's pretty insane. And she said, "All of a sudden, I felt like I was part of something so enormous and vast, and it wasn't personal at all. It was the game of life which we are born into."

So this is the basis for a practice called equanimity practice.

The equanimity practice, which is like the compassion training or perhaps the loving-kindness practice many of you have done, is a combination of envisioning and using certain phrases that invite a quality of equanimity.

The phrases are: *May I see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May I be spacious, balanced, and at ease. May I live with a peaceful heart.*

And then there's one more. A tough one.

And this is when you're doing equanimity for other people as we expand the practice. Equanimity serves as a balance for compassion and loving kindness. When you do the practices of compassion and loving kindness, they can sometimes fall into attachment. "I love this person, and I really want them to get better, and I really want them to get their act together, and I'm really compassionate for them, but I want this or that." You feel not only love or care, but also some hope that there'll be some way or something for you. And it can go to the level of codependence, where you do everything for somebody that they need to learn to do for themselves.

So the last phrase of the equanimity practice, as you picture people who are close to you or others, is: "Your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions, and not my wishes for you."

Here you've been doing compassion—"May you be held in compassion"—and loving kindness—"May you be held in loving kindness"—and so forth. But then, to balance that so you don't get lost in it, you realize you can care for them, you can love them, but you can't be happy for them. You can't let go for them. You can't live for them. And so then you say, "Your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions and not my wishes for you." And you can feel the truth of it. It places the responsibility, the capacity to awaken, in the hands and heart of that person.

It's actually quite helpful in difficult relationships. I remember teaching this—I ran a group, or was invited to run a group, for women of color at Alice Walker's home for about a decade. Very accomplished women: a professor at Berkeley, the head of HIV services for the city of San Francisco, Alice as a Pulitzer Prize winner, and so forth. When I taught this, I was a little nervous, thinking they might feel it was cold and uncaring. But in fact, when we finished, it was really important because they said, "In our

community, especially a community of people of color and target communities where there's been a lot of suffering, a lot of racism, a lot of difficulty, those of us who were accomplished in some way—many people will come and say, 'Help me. Help me publish my book. Give me money. Fix my family. Do something for me because you have power and money and I need it.'" They said it's very easy to get overwhelmed by the need. And so to hear this and be able to say, "I can love you, I can do what I'm able to do, but your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions and not my wishes for you," was actually important and liberating for them.

You understand? So, are you ready?

Let your eyes close. As always, we'll begin by just coming back to feel your breath and body as you sit here. Relax with each breath. As you sit quietly, you can reflect on the value of a peaceful heart—the value of moving through all the changes, praise and blame, gain and loss, and living with a sense of balance.

Let yourself acknowledge that all created things arise and pass away. Joys and sorrows. Pleasant and unpleasant events. People, animals, buildings, nations, whole civilizations rise and fall. Let yourself come to rest in the midst of it all.

May I see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May I be spacious, balanced, at ease.

Feel the vastness of the turning of the seasons, the changes of life.

May I move through the world with a peaceful heart.

Let your loving awareness open like the sky, as big as this room or as vast as the sky beyond. And within it arise feelings and thoughts and experiences.

May I see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May I be spacious and balanced and at ease. May I move through the world with a peaceful heart.

And now let yourself think of someone for whom you want to wish this same quality of peace and equanimity. Picture them, remember or envision them. And as if you could share the field of spaciousness and peace with them as you envision them:

May you be spacious and balanced and at ease. May you see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May you move through the world with a peaceful heart.

Your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions and not my wishes for you. You can love them and care for them, but you can't be happy for them. You can't live for them. Your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions and not my wishes for you. May you see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance.

Now think of another person for whom you want to wish a peaceful heart. Picture them too.

May you see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May you be spacious, balanced, and at ease. May you move through the world with a peaceful heart.

And in the end, your happiness and suffering depend on your thoughts and actions and not my wishes for you. I can love you or care for you, but it's in your own heart and mind, your happiness and suffering.

And feel that the circles of peacefulness can extend to everyone seated in this room around you. May all of us see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May we live with a peaceful heart.

And imagine or sense or feel that you could extend the well-wishing of equanimity and peace out from this room, across the landscape—to the firefighters and the people who are losing their homes, to all the communities around them, to all the people of the Bay Area, to the animals, birds of the sky and beasts of the fields, fish in the waters.

And that the sense of peace could spread far and wide across the continents and the nations and the world.

May beings everywhere learn to see the arising and passing of all life with equanimity and balance. May beings everywhere be spacious, balanced, and at ease. May beings everywhere live with a peaceful heart.

So again, these are practices, and there are many of them, and some may work for you better than others. You might find compassion is good and equanimity feels too detached or dry, or you might find being with your breath and body is a great way to practice, but then this feels very mechanical. So don't judge yourself, but rather respect and listen without judgment to what serves you.

But what's also true about these kinds of practices is you don't just take one piano lesson, you know, or one tennis lesson or one lesson in coding. That's why it's called practice rather than perfect or something else, right? So you do it and you do it a number of times. And as you do, more and more of the states that you're inviting, or the perspective, start to become available to you.

A participant shares: "When I was seven years old, I watched my mother die in a car accident. I was in the accident. And it took me sixty-two years—I counted it up—before I could grieve. Thanks to this wonderful therapist who introduced me to mindfulness. And I guess my point is that it's never too late."

Hmm.

And now, ironically, we're having difficulty locating her. She lives in Santa Rosa, so we're hoping.

Thank you for that. It's really, really important what you say. First, the loss is great—for a seven-year-old, grievous. But to say it's never too late, and that these things can be held for so long and then released, it's really, really important. So thank you.

Yes, please.

Participant: So Jack, I want to acknowledge that you said this in your teaching, but a cautionary tale for me is that when I first came to Spirit Rock, I was told to practice like my hair was on fire.

You don't have a lot of hair, I noticed.

It burned off. It all burned off. And it was a club that I used to attack myself. Then over the years, Spirit Rock changed and there was a lot more about equanimity practices, wisdom practices, joy. And again, in my hardheadedness, they were all ways that I used to attack myself. I remember I went to a talk at the Zen Center by Ajahn Sumedho, and somebody asked him about these, and he said, "You know, I never did them. They didn't work for me." And it shocked me because I had never heard anybody say that before.

Never did what?

These kinds of practices—the equanimity and the loving-kindness. And I read a poem by a Japanese priest that said to trust your practice. It's like water flowing downhill; it will find the best way down. And I've come to understand that—I don't know how this happened—but I've learned complete faith in my practice. It'll take me where I need to go.

It will teach me the equanimity I need to learn. I don't do that. I can't do that. I've already learned that. But my practice is not me. It's something that happens to me. And I've learned to just really trust it. It knows. I don't have to.

Thank you. Really important and critical things that you say. The first, with a lot of respect to you, is that you do have to be steward of your own practice. And if you read the old Buddhist texts, there are actually a lot of practices in there. Some are fitting for a certain person and some are not, which is part of what you're pointing out.

And here's a little note about Ajahn Sumedho, who's an old friend that I've known for fifty years. I could show you something that he wrote back in the 1970s or '80s where loving-kindness meditation was really important for him. So I need to say that only because it's also true that some of these practices may be helpful for you at a particular time and may not be helpful at another time. You either outgrow them or they don't fit. And so that follows just what you're saying about respecting and paying attention to yourself.

And what I've seen now over these decades of both training teachers and being with people in our community, just as you say, is that the work of the heart and mind that's dedicated—each in your own way—to attention and kindness, however you practice it, changes us. And I really see it.

I have this passage from Tamara Engel, who wrote this in the last weeks of her life. She says, "My days are short, and as I grow weaker, I experience so much gratitude for my meditation. Not only the joy and ease that it brought, but the hard parts. For every bored and restless sitting, and every fearful fantasy about my illness, and every pain and ache I sat through, and every itch I didn't scratch—it was a training for kindness. A training for the muscle of bearing witness. For the trusting spirit that carries me now, even as I face my death."

And so that was her description, like yours, of trusting practice in the way that worked for her. Thank you for that beautiful comment.

One more in the back, please.

Participant: I'm glad you just said there are different practices for different times. I remember there have been times, especially when I was falling in love, when I was trying to have equanimity and I just couldn't do it. And I was just reflecting that you do need to have different practices at different times—but how do you know? How do you know when to do what?

It's a great question. And I would say, how do you know who to marry? How do you know which job to pick? Nobody can answer it for you. Sometimes it's some intuitive knowing. Sometimes it's based on trying things.

Trial marriage? Well, maybe. Done that. With this, you don't have to get a divorce from your meditation, fortunately. But I think you try stuff. Maybe you say, I'll try it for a bit because it feels like it might be helpful. And if you try it for a while and it doesn't feel helpful, maybe this isn't the right thing or the right time. So it really is a deep listening to yourself, more than anything else.

After a break

Let's take a few more questions or comments before the next section because we're covering a lot of different material and approaches today. Anything anyone would like to raise as a comment, question, experience?

A participant speaks

Earlier in one of the sessions, you mentioned the river of thoughts.

Yes, I mentioned the river of thoughts.

It comes through, and I noticed in one of the trainings you did earlier, naming the thoughts seems to make the river of thoughts slow down a little bit. And then I also seem to notice that there was a space between thoughts.

Beautiful. And what's in that space? What is that? What a great question. Or maybe—who's in that space? That's a fabulous question.

It's true that when you turn your attention to thoughts, there comes a kind of shift from being inside the thought—where you're in Chicago now doing a business deal, or dealing with your long-lost brother or sister and their family, you're right in the middle of it—to noticing, "Oh, there's a thought about Chicago," or "There's a thought about whatever it is." It's like you step outside of it. And if you name it—"planning" or "remembering" or "envisioning"—very often it will kind of dissolve, like fog under sunlight. Which is what you described: sometimes it will dissolve or disappear.

And then you notice, whether you do that or not, that there are spaces between thoughts. And the spaces between thoughts become very interesting, because we usually are so identified with our thoughts that the spaces between thoughts start to show us who we are—or what we are—when we're not thinking, when we're not taking that as an identity.

I'll say a few things about it because it gives an opportunity to talk about three levels of mindfulness. The first level of mindfulness is the level of being able to be present for the content of experience. As we're practicing and training, we're able more and more to acknowledge: this is fear, this is longing, this is the planning mind, this is anxiety, this is love.

This is the memory of conflict or the memory of great pleasure. This is sexual desire. This is some spiritual ideal or ideas that we have. This is physical pain in the body or pleasure. We become able to notice the content—this is sort of recognizing and accepting—and become able to be present for it. Already that gives us a great deal of freedom, because we're not afraid of that bigger range of experience.

The second level of mindfulness is mindfulness of the process. As we pay attention more and more, we notice that nothing lasts. Every thought and every sensation and every mood and every feeling, if we track it and name it, arises for a time and passes away. We start to see the river of thoughts, the stream of emotions. When we pay attention to the body, it too has all these changing sensations. Even something that feels stuck and solid and painful—when you pay really close attention, it has lots of little sensations that make it up. Some pain actually has fire and needle pinpricks, or vibrating, or something like that.

The more closely you pay attention, experience gets pixelated, the way those little pixels are on a screen. Nothing is solid. It's all created in solidity by the mind. The eye isn't a camera that just looks at you and you and you. If you look closely at the eye, you would see that it's actually vibrating a little bit, picking up experiences on the retina from different angles. Then it goes up through the optic nerve and it's your little brain that organizes it and says, "Oh, that's a man and that's a woman and that's a cow." But the eye isn't seeing it stably that way. Our brain creates—our mind creates—the solidity of the world.

As you become more closely attentive, that solidity starts to dissolve. You see that there are not only thoughts but spaces between thoughts. One feeling follows another. Sensations are really a field of vibrating sensations. You start to realize that you can't hold on to things in the way that you thought you could, because they're always changing. If you try to hold on, you get rope burn, basically, because they're not going to stay still.

Every experience starts to show itself as impermanent, as tentative, as insubstantial in some way, because whatever it is, it dissolves. The strongest feeling, the best thought, the worst thought—they come and they go. This is what happens. And there's a certain kind of unsatisfactoriness to it all, in that none of it can be a place to rest. None of it

gives you lasting, stable happiness. Even with the great pleasures, which are wonderful to enjoy, they change. And when you're in the middle of them, you think, "How much longer? How can I hold on to this? How do I get more of this?" Even in the middle, there's that little worry, because you know that however cool and wonderful that experience is—oh my God, it's so great—it's not going to last forever.

And so there comes a kind of wisdom. The first level of wisdom is just that you can be with all of human experience. The second one is you realize, "Oh, it's a river. It's changing all the time." So you learn how to be with changing experience and ungraspable experience. That's from content to process.

Then, as we go further, the third level of mindfulness—which your question points to—is to begin to become aware of consciousness itself, of awareness, and to turn your attention back to the space between thoughts, to the knower and the knowing. Who is it that's noticing that everything's impermanent? Who is it that's noticing the arising and passing of things? I'm not going to go into that further for this moment, because in half an hour or so, that's going to be the next piece of what we talk about. So you're kind of leading us to that. That's a great question.

Question from audience: I have a question about equanimity. I've heard it described as the love that allows.

Yes.

When I'm by myself at home, I find that I often feel the need emotionally to...

It's almost to have permission or to be allowed to come through.

"Wait, so there you are, you're home alone, and you feel the need to... to allow myself to open."

Permission to open.

"Yeah. I mean, I feel the permission, say, when you were just talking about equanimity, and it's just lovely. It feels wonderful. And at home, I probably don't even realize how clenched I am. So to begin to unclench, to allow myself equanimity, you might say—what would you suggest?"

Sounds good. I mean, you know, part of what's true is that our organism always expands and contracts. And sometimes people get the idea that if I'm successful in meditation and spiritual life, I'm going to become spacious like the sky and allow all things. And that's how I'll move through life—just so expansive, open, everything always open.

But you have to breathe. Your body breathes, and your heart pumps, open and closed. The cerebrospinal fluid pumps. And it turns out the heart opens and closes too—the psychic level of the heart. And the mind opens and closes too.

So the point isn't to get to some state and say, "Now I have it," but to be respectful and compassionate with opening and closing. When you notice that things become tight or contracted or attached, with mindfulness you notice that. And sometimes just in the noticing, that's enough. Or sometimes you might say, "Let me bring in a little kindness or compassion or just an invitation to open."

I think that quality of invitation that you described is a lovely way to describe this practice—which is, when we've gotten lost in some way, to repeatedly invite mindfulness to be present. One of the translations of *sati*, *sati sampajañña*, the word for mindfulness, is "remembering." So that's what you're doing. You're remembering: "Oh yeah, I can breathe, I can make space." That's lovely.

Someone asked where to find the different meditations we're doing. There are written versions in many of the things I've done. A lot of them are in *The Wise Heart*. There's even more of them in *The Art of Forgiveness, Loving-Kindness, and Peace*—about fifteen meditations in there. And then there are many online—my own, and Sharon Salzberg, Tara Brach, Joseph Goldstein, and various teachers who offer versions of loving-kindness, compassion, or forgiveness. YouTube has lots of this.

Now I want to move on to a few more sections. The next has to do with forgiveness. In terms of self-care and care in the world, there are so many liberating tools. There are the tools of wise speech—sometimes translated as "right speech"—and how to pay attention to our words and have them connected with our best values.

With compassion, one of the things that's really central is understanding that it always has to include ourselves. If you feel like you're being compassionate for someone or some circumstance, which is lovely—caring, feeling their difficulty—the question to ask is: Is this action compassionate for them *and* for this one sitting here, for me? That's the completion of the circle. If it's only them, that falls into codependence or burnout. If it's only yourself, of course, it can fall into separation or self-absorption or narcissism. So compassion is really a circle that includes care for others and care for this one.

Now, one of the things that is both a practice and an understanding of Buddhist psychology is the power of forgiveness. Or as someone beautifully said, "It's never too late to start over again."

And I remember working with this mother whose teenage daughter was really angry at her. She felt as a mom she couldn't do anything right since her husband, the father of this child, had died. And of course, the anger was really part of the daughter's way of grieving—not letting go of her father, holding on. So there was all this struggle between them.

One day they were in the kitchen, and the daughter was complaining, saying she wasn't doing it right. And the mom said to her daughter, very simply, "You'll have to forgive me. I'm doing the best I can since dad died." And that's all. Really, really simple.

Here's a story from my friend Frank Ostaseski, from his book called *The Five Invitations*. He was the founder of Zen Center Hospice, which has been there for twenty-five years. He tells many different stories, and this is one about Jillian, whose mother was in the middle to late stages of Alzheimer's disease and had lost a lot of her memory and was pretty confused. Jillian had brought her mother home to live with her.

Jillian worked in the publishing industry as an editor, and she came home to her living room one day to find all her beloved books—she had a great library, including her Buddhist texts—scattered across the floor. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty old books. I'm going to give them to my dentist." So you can sort of hear a little of the delusion in that, right?

Jillian became really angry right away, scolded her mother's assistant who had come to tend to her and live with them, saying, "How could you let this happen? How could you let her do this?" And the attendant, who wasn't caught up in the whole drama, replied, "Madam, today I pack the books up and tomorrow I will unpack them. And if this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well, then it's fine with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

And you can hear how forgiving and gracious that is. That that's just the way it is. The books are down and we can put them back on the shelves, and she won't even notice a little bit later whether she took them down or not. Our ideas about how the world should be and our reactions are very different than the way the world actually is.

So forgiveness, in large ways and small, is a really critical thing for human life. It's necessary, or we are chained to the past, both personally and collectively. As you know, if you have the Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics saying, "Your people marched through our neighborhood three hundred years ago, and did this to our people—we're never going to forget it," then they just keep it going from one generation to another. Am I right?

My dear Irish friend Michael Meade said where he grew up in Brooklyn, people were having a fight and you could walk over and say, "Is this a private fight or can anybody join?" It was like that was part of their sport. But this pattern has created a tremendous amount of suffering in Ireland. Or the Palestinians and the Israelis, or the Bosnians and the Croats and the Serbs, or the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda. And we could go on and on. If there isn't forgiveness, then the next generation continues the cycle. It doesn't have an end to it. And somebody has to say, "It stops with me. It stops with me."

Again, there was a woman who came to see me who was in the middle of a divorce. She had married a very high-powered lawyer. He was the one who had the affair, but nevertheless, he was trying to take the children, turning them against her, and trying to keep all the money. He wasn't all that nice of a fellow. So we started to work together. I said, "Get yourself a killer lawyer. You need something good to protect you." And I told her she'd have to deal with all the suffering with good compassion and so forth.

She came in one day—because he was trying to turn the children against her to get custody, one of those very painful, messy divorces—and she said, "I've come to a realization. I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children."

No matter what my husband does, I will not speak badly of their father to my children. Whatever suffering there is, it stops with me. I will not pass it on.

There was so much courage and dignity and beauty to that state of consciousness, even though she was suffering terribly.

Forgiveness is necessary, or we get locked into the past. And the beautiful thing is that it can be taught. But you need to understand some things about it first as you practice it or teach it.

Many of you have heard this practice or done it before. But the first thing is that it doesn't condone what happened. It doesn't say it's okay—forgive and forget. In fact, the opposite. You can say, "I see it clearly, and I will never again allow this suffering to continue. I'll do everything I can to stop it." It doesn't mean you have to speak with the person you're doing forgiveness with. You can stand up and stop whatever is causing suffering. Forgiveness simply means that you're not going to carry the hatred in your heart. That's all. You do what you need to do to protect yourself and others. It doesn't condone it, but I simply am not going to carry hatred.

And who is it for in the end? You know, the people who betrayed you—I'm talking personally now—they could be on vacation in Maui right now, snorkeling. And you're sitting there thinking, "I hate them, I hate them." Who's suffering?

In the end, it's really for yourself. It's like the two ex-prisoners of war that I always mention, who've been in terrible situations—prisoner of war camp and tortured and all those things—and they meet twenty years later. One says to the other, "Well, have you forgiven your captors yet? Those guards?" And the second one says, "No, never." The first one says, "Well then, they still have you in prison, don't they?"

It's not really for anyone else. They may or may not accept it, and that's not the point. It's so that you don't carry the suffering into the future in your life and pass it on to others.

It also is not a papering over. "Okay, I've done a little forgiveness practice—ha ha, it's all done." You know, sweet, loving Buddhist nonsense. You might experience rage and grief and outrage and anger for a year or two, or however long it takes. But at some point, you realize, okay, it's too much to bear. It's too hard to carry this. And like that IRS check I talked about—that guy—maybe you do it a little step at a time. But finally you realize that you've got to give up all hope for a better past. It's done. It's over. You can't change it. And you don't really want to put anybody out of your heart.

So you realize that the forgiveness is not for them, but it's the quality that you live with. And it's not weak or naive. Like the woman who said, "I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children." It said in the Bhagavad Gita, if you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the courageous, look to those who can return love for hatred.

And of course there's Martin Luther King, after his church was bombed and children killed, who said, "We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we will bear the suffering that you offer us, and we will so bear it with so much love that not only will we change ourselves, but we will change your consciousness at the same time."

That's really powerful and tough. So it's not weak at all. It's actually tremendously courageous.

I think about a friend who was working in San Francisco, doing chaplaincy hospice work. There was a man there who was a prisoner who'd been brought to the hospital. He had HIV and Hep C and he was dying. She asked, "Do you want to talk to your family?"

He said, "No, no, no. Since I was put in prison fifteen years ago, I have not talked to my mother."

I think it would break her heart. I just couldn't do it.

"Do you have other brothers and sisters?"

"I have one sister. I haven't talked to her either."

"Well, maybe your mother would like to see you."

And they talked for a while. Eventually he agreed to let this chaplain call his mother. She came some days later—this little old, shaky, older woman who came around the door and just stood and looked at her son. He didn't want his mother to see him shackled to the bed, which he was, still a prisoner.

And my friend said it was like watching the Madonna. It was like watching Mother Mary walk around the corner of the door and look into the room—because she was still his mom. This is my baby. And she stood there and just looked at him with so much love and began to weep out of care for him.

Yes, he was dying. He was dying of HIV and Hep C. But instead of having pushed her away, by somehow inviting her to come in, she began to see him with a kind of forgiveness he couldn't give himself. And that transforms us.

So many stories of forgiveness I could tell you. One good friend of mine, a woman named Sujata Baliga—her story was written up in the New York Times Magazine—is one of the most important figures in the restorative justice movement in America, which brings together people who committed crimes of different kinds with their victims in a very delicate dance over a year or two, preparing them to meet each other and maybe to offer forgiveness.

She grew up abused, sexually abused in her family by her father in terrible ways—all kinds of grave suffering. She was very smart, went to Harvard, and was about to go to law school. She said, "I'm going to get those guys. I'm going to go to law school"—which she did eventually—"and I'm going to prosecute them and throw them all in prison."

But as she started her law practice, she got more and more sick because the anger inside was eating her up. Because her family had come from India and she had grandparents there, she went back to India. Somebody said, "Let's go visit the Dalai Lama and listen to his teaching." They went up to Dharamsala. She left a note at the gate of the Dalai Lama's home saying, "I don't know if it's possible to ask a question, but my anger is eating me up. I graduated Harvard. I'm now doing law. I've been abused, and I don't know what to do."

The next day, a little message came: "Please come Thursday morning. His Holiness will see you."

So she went in to see him. He listened to her story compassionately, as he does, and said, "Two things for you. You have to learn to meditate, including doing some forgiveness practice. And then you have to work with the perpetrators."

She said, "Okay, meditation I think I can handle, but I can't work with those people."

But eventually she did. She tells a story of being in a room with twelve men in a prison who had all been abusers of girls mostly, maybe boys too. She said she was shaking; it was so painful, so difficult. Then as she began to talk to them and listen to them over some weeks, she went in one day to the group and looked around. She didn't see twelve men. She saw twelve abused children—because every single one of them had been abused, mostly sexually abused too. All of a sudden, she said, "I could see the generations of suffering." It didn't justify what they did in any way whatsoever, but it made her able to see their humanity. That changed her heart. She became a real advocate for restorative justice and does all kinds of wonderful work. Sujata Baliga is her name.

I remember standing at the Lincoln Memorial and reading those last lines carved in the stone. It really is a temple, a great temple, where it says, "With malice toward none and charity toward all." That's a remarkable phrase after a civil war that killed literally millions of people. With malice toward none and charity toward all, let us bind up the wounds of this war.

This is also what's asked of us, and what's possible for you. Remember, we started the day talking about inner nobility and dignity for a human being. This is what's possible for us.

So there's a beautiful practice of forgiveness which we'll do now. It serves as a kind of warm-up for loving-kindness, though I'm not sure we'll get to loving-kindness today since we already practiced compassion, and we have a couple more things to do.

Let your eyes close gently. Sit quietly, and we'll practice three directions of forgiveness.

The first time I was taught this, the teacher said, "Do this a couple times a day for ten minutes. Try it out for six months and come back and let me know how it's working." And what that meant was—I thought about it and figured it out—"Oh gosh, he means do it three hundred times." Sometimes the practice brings up the opposite: "I hate them. I'm never going to forgive them." Sometimes it just feels numb or dead. All kinds of things arise.

And what do you do with that? You hold all of it with forgiveness and compassion. Wherever you are is exactly where you start. Maybe all you can say is, "I'm beginning to learn to incline my attention more toward forgiveness, that it might be possible." And that's the move you can make. That's totally fine. You don't want to use any of these practices to judge yourself. You're already too good at that.

So sit quietly and come back to your breath.

The first direction of forgiveness: There are many ways in which I have hurt and harmed others, knowingly or unknowingly. We've all betrayed people, caused them pain and suffering. Every one of us has. Abandoned them, betrayed them. I remember these now, and feel the pain I still carry. Choose one person in particular to ask forgiveness from. "In the ways that I've hurt or harmed you, betrayed you, abandoned you, caused you suffering—out of my own confusion and fear, out of my own pain or anger or hurt—in this moment, I ask your forgiveness. Please forgive me. May I be forgiven." Sense that you can be forgiven. May I be forgiven.

The second direction is forgiveness for yourself. Just as I've hurt or harmed others, there are many ways I have betrayed myself, abandoned myself, caused myself harm or pain, knowingly or unknowingly. I remember these now too, and feel the sorrows I carry. Let yourself choose a particular thing you want to forgive yourself for. "In the ways that I have betrayed myself, abandoned myself, caused myself pain or hurt—out of my own confusion and fear, out of my own ignorance or anger or hurt—I now offer myself forgiveness. I forgive myself." Hold yourself with mercy and tenderness. If you wish, you can put your hand on your heart, whatever allows you to feel that you can be forgiven. I forgive myself. I hold myself with tenderness and mercy. I offer myself forgiveness.

The third direction is to offer forgiveness to those who've hurt you. There are many ways that others have hurt and harmed me, abandoned me, betrayed me, caused me pain and suffering, knowingly or unknowingly. I remember these now too, and feel the sorrows I carry.

And now choose one that it's time to forgive. In the ways that you have hurt or harmed me, abandoned me, betrayed me, knowingly or unknowingly, that you caused me pain, suffering, out of your ignorance and confusion, out of your fear and anger and hurt and pain—I now forgive you. I offer you forgiveness to the extent that I'm ready. To the extent that I'm ready, I forgive you. Feel how liberating it is, how it's possible to let go and forgive. To live with a forgiving heart. To the extent that I'm ready, I offer you forgiveness.

Asking forgiveness of others, offering forgiveness to yourself, and extending forgiveness to those who harmed you. We've all been betrayed and harmed, and we all can forgive. As we do these practices, each one, again, might bring up its opposite, might feel mechanical, might or might not be easy. But they all point to a vast possibility of human freedom, no matter the circumstances of our life.

I saw it with my friend and teacher Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia. Nineteen members of his family were killed. He went around teaching: "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient eternal law." In spite of all that happened, that was what he did. Nominated for the Nobel Prize a number of times, he led people back to their villages and towns, singing, chanting the chants of loving-kindness and forgiveness. This is the way you reclaim your life.

So the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity—the sense that we're part of some vast mystery. Human incarnation is a really wild thing, you know. I don't know how you got in there. One hole at the end of the body into which you stuff dead plants and animals and grind them up with these bones that hang down. These weird orbs that you look out of. And you ambulate by falling one direction, catching yourself, then falling the other direction. These bipedal things—it's weird. Wiggly things at the end with little bits of claws and a vestigial tail. I mean, come on.

And if you want to really look at it, pay attention the next time you're making love. It's a great thing to do. It's quite wonderful. But it's weird. It is. I mean, come on—no matter what kind of love you make, it's a strange thing. And then the fact that sometimes a little squirt here and a little egg somewhere there, and a new person. This is completely wild. How did that happen?

My teacher Ajahn Chah practiced as a monk in the jungles and forests for about ten years, doing deep meditation trainings—concentration and samādhi and lights. He had all the difficulties that one would have. In those days there were tigers, certainly still lots of snakes and things like that. The inner difficulties of his own fears. But he was very determined, and he had all these wonderful insights and great meditations. He went to another ajahn, the most famous teacher of the time, bowed, and said, "I want to tell you about my meditation. I want some advice." He bowed, paid his respects.

The master listened to him and said, "Chah, you missed the point. Yes, you dissolved your body in light and you had some bodily experiences and you had grief and you had all these experiences." He said, "Those are just experiences. It's like being in the movies. There's a war movie and a romantic comedy and a documentary and a children's movie

and so forth." He said, "You've seen a lot of good movies, but the only real question is: to whom do they happen? Otherwise, you're just lost in the movies. Turn back and look at the projector, look at the light."

And his words were, "Become the one who knows." Instead of identifying with all the content or even the changing process, this is that third step of mindfulness, which looks back at awareness itself. Become the knowing itself. Become the awareness. Who you are is loving awareness itself.

Spirit was born into this body; it will die. When you die, it will leave. Anybody who's sat with a number of people dying knows—it's very clear because they'll drift out. They'll describe it: floating, coming back, ocean of light, or whatever. You're not your body.

I was sitting with one of our teachers, Marlene Jones. She had heart failure. A long time passed before the paramedics got there, and she was brought to the hospital, iced, put into a deliberate coma for a while, then brought back. Flatline—fifteen, twenty minutes of no oxygen. No response. Touch her, speak to her, put the monitors on her—nothing.

After about a week, sitting with her daughter and family, it became clear: it was time to unplug her. I held her hand, did a little chanting, and I said, "Marlene, I'm really going to miss you. You're a wonderful woman and a wonderful teacher. I'd hoped we'd have a lot more years together, but you died too quickly. Come on. The least you could do is give a sign—now or later—something, so we know you're all right."

The minute I said that, two tears rolled down her cheeks. They'd gotten nothing for a week, every possible way of trying to stimulate her brain, her body. But I said that and two tears rolled down her cheeks, and then she died, not many minutes after.

This is one of many stories I could tell. You're not your body. You rent it—from Avis or something like that—and you have to turn it back in. Mileage is over, okay, time enough.

You're certainly not your thoughts—I hope not, given the way most people's minds go. You're not your feelings because they're always changing. So who are you?

Well, maybe I'm the awareness. Maybe I'm the witness. But then the interesting thing is you look and you discover there's awareness, but it's not attached to a self. You can't find yourself in there.

Who am I? Neuroscience. There was a Time Magazine neuroscience issue that said, after more than a century of looking for it, brain researchers have long since concluded that there's no conceivable place for a self to be located in the physical brain, and that it simply does not exist. That's the neuroscientist version of it, which means that the idea of self is an idea. It's constructed by our thoughts and our identification.

When you look into the mirror—and you can try this; for some people, it's interesting—you notice you've aged, right? Your body doesn't look like it used to. In my case, it loses its fur. It wrinkles. Our teacher Wes Nisker, who's sort of a humorist, says the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. The body does all these weird things. But the thing that's very common is you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? Okay, I've aged, but I don't feel that.

That's because it's only your body that's aging. The awareness that's looking says, "Hmm, how are we doing in this incarnation? Well, it looks older. I don't feel any older." The awareness itself exists outside of time. It's not in time. The body is temporal—it goes from little to medium to big, and then it shrinks again. That's what plants and trees and mammals do. But the awareness is timeless.

We are creatures of paradox. We have these bodies, but they're not who we are—and yet you have to honor them. There's a Serbian proverb: "Be grateful, for you are made of stars. Be humble, for you're made of mud."

Ram Dass puts it this way.

He says, "Remember your Buddha nature and your zip code." That you need both. Or your social security number. You have to live in these two worlds—the world of eternity, which is true, from which you come, and also this human incarnation. You need to honor both in this paradox.

And we all know this again. When you're walking in the mountains or listening to an amazing piece of music or sitting with someone who dies or making love, you remember that you're not this small sense of self. As this sense of self, which is fluid, starts to open in meditation, and you become more and more able to become the awareness that witnesses things, then you turn back and realize there isn't even someone there. There's just awareness. This is what you are. You are loving awareness.

Joy comes, luminosity. In Buddhist psychology there are—because they're list makers—twenty kinds of joy. Thrilling joy and tingling joy and dissolving into light joy, all these great kinds. And eighteen kinds of silence.

Instead of that loyalty to your suffering, identity begins to shift. You rest more in the timeless. You see the play of life. And you're comfortable with mystery. Because it is mysterious—no matter what any scientist might say. The best scientists, like Einstein, they say it's all mystery. And you become what's called "the wisdom of insecurity." You become wise enough to see that you don't have to hold on to things.

It's like Somerset Maugham, who wrote all these celebrated novels. Somebody asked him about it and he said, "There are three rules for writing the great English novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." And that's pretty much our predicament.

From this, there comes an ease and a graciousness and a joy, like Gary Snyder saying, don't feel guilty. Being angry or guilty is not what the world needs. It needs a sense that you love it, that it's part of you, that you're connected. That's the power that will save it.

And so there starts to grow a sense of joy.

Here are instructions from the Buddha: "Live in joy and love even among those who hate. Live in joy and health even among the afflicted. Live in joy and peace even among the troubled. Look within, be still, free from fear and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

Because your unhappiness or depression and your fear does not help those other people. Actually, the spirit that you bring—whether you go into San Quentin prison or whether you go up to help in the fire area or whether you serve in a thousand other ways—if you go in moping and depressed and upset, it doesn't help anybody.

That's one of the beautiful things. There's a great book published last year, I think it's called *The Book of Joy*. It's a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, and they laugh a lot. It's this whole week-long dialogue, and people ask them, "How can you have lived through so much suffering in South Africa and apartheid and Tibet and the occupation and the loss of your temples?" And the Dalai Lama says, "Listen, they've taken so much from me. They've taken the temples and our ability to practice our religion and all the sense of what was sacred in our culture. Why should I let them take my happiness?"

So you don't allow that to colonize your heart in some very deep and important way.

As Guillaume Apollinaire says, "Now and then it's good to pause in your pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

And so the idea in meditation isn't to make it a grim duty. "Okay, now I go to the gym and I work out, and now I've got to meditate." It's actually to find a way that nourishes you. Even if it's for three minutes a day that brings a sense of well-being, rest, tending yourself, capacity to be present. And then more than that, becoming the witness, becoming the loving awareness that says, "Hmm, today has joy and sorrow. Let me be the loving witness of it all."

And there are all kinds of beautiful practices that increase joy. Just as there's a compassion practice or an equanimity practice, there's a joy practice. The way you start is to envision—you might start with another person that you care about, to picture their best adventure as a young child, or to do it in yourself. To think back to that day, one of your best adventures, your most joyful day: tickled, laughing, rolling around in the grass, playing tag, enjoying being with others.

I like to start it where you picture somebody else you care about, and imagine their best day as a young child, and how they were. Because there's a youthful spirit. Raccoons and otters and baby chimpanzees—they all like to play when they're little. They delight in life. And that was born in you too, even if you had a very difficult childhood, which some of you clearly did. There were moments where you could do that.

I've been in refugee camps, and these kids make little cars out of old cans of milk that were brought by the UN or something—an empty can, and they put a couple of them on a stick and go racing around. Kids are kids. And there's a child of the spirit in every single person, sometimes buried in there a bit.

The joy practice begins to see that in each person you meet and to invite: may that joy increase, may their happiness grow. And more and more you begin to allow yourself to tune yourself to well-being. Of course, you'll have people who say, "Well, this isn't possible for me. My suffering is too great." But if you see it in them, then sometimes they start to see it in themselves.

So this is another of the many possibilities in Buddhist psychology: who you really are is not limited to your history. Consciousness is actually free to create itself.

And another Ram Dass story, just because it's kind of fun to tell them. He was going to come back from India. He actually wanted to stay for much longer with his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, practicing. And then at some point, his guru said, "Now it's time for you to go back and share this with people in America."

Ram Dass thought about it. He said, "You know, I feel so uncooked, and I feel really impure, and I know about my imperfections. I think I should practice a while longer before I go and try to teach anybody else."

His guru looked at him and got up off the little wooden bench where he sat. He took a couple of minutes and walked over to Ram Dass. He looked him up and down, turned around the side and looked, went around the back and looked him up and down, and around the other side. He spent a long time looking at him, then sat back down and peered into his eyes. And he said, "I see no imperfections."

There's something in India that's called the glance of mercy, where a teacher looks at you with so much affection and love that it just rewires your brain. It just changes your life—because they see something so beautiful in you that you haven't let yourself know that you carry. "I see no imperfections."

And so, yes, all the trainings—we can direct ourselves toward more love or compassion or healthier states of mind. But even those are not the deep level. The real level is that you are free, and you've always been free. And that's what's true. And then you get to create, with this amazing human incarnation, what you will do.

So one more principle—central principles, there's so many things we could do. The last one before we do a meditation and a ritual to end the day. And this is to talk about the power of intentions. Or cause and effect. Sometimes talked about as karma.

A description. A psychological description of how the world works. If you're really angry and you treat the world with anger, guess what will come back to you? Anger. Other people will respond in kind. If you're really loving and you treat the world lovingly, guess what will start to come back to you, much more anyway? Love. It just works that way.

And the key to it is intention. If you get in your car and you crash through your neighbor's fence into their living room because you are really pissed that they cut down all the great old trees right on the lot line between yours and theirs, and then they let their dog run on your lawn and poop on your lawn and blast loud music, and you hate your neighbor and you get overcome with it and you drive your car through the hedge and into their house—well, the little blue police lights will come and they'll haul you away for destruction of property and illegal things and lock you up.

Now, if you get in your car and you crash through their fence and their hedge into the living room because your accelerator stuck, bad model, and you can't stop it—exactly the same activity. You're in your car, you crash through the hedge and the fence, you crash into their living room. The only difference is your intention. And that intention then changes everything. "Oh, you know, he may be upset, but I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for you. We have to call the insurance." "Yes, let's call people to get it fixed." They

don't call the police about it, like you've done something wrong. The source of karma is the intention behind your actions. And that's how the world treats you and how it will respond.

So to understand intention is extremely important in Buddhist psychology. And there are two forms: short-term and long-term intention.

Short-term intention comes with a great practice called the mindful pause. You're in the middle of a little conflict with someone, or you're going to return a text or an email, or respond to somebody. Or you're in a meeting or whatever, and you're about to react and get back at somebody. And before you do anything, you take a breath or two and you pause—the mindful pause—and then you ask yourself, "What's my best intention?" Or, "What's my highest intention?"

And there you are. Let's take a couple, since some of you are in a relationship, and you're having a little conflict that could happen in your marriage or in your life. Normally when somebody says something that triggers us, we often will want to respond to say how we're right and how they're wrong. Get even, show what we know or something like that. You take a breath, you do the little mindful pause. And instead of doing that, you say, "All right, what's my best intention?" Well, it's not to get even. It's not to show that I'm right. It's really to connect or to love this person, or to open in some other way, to understand. And the minute you ask, "What's my best intention?"—usually it comes very clearly—the tone of your voice changes, what you have to say changes.

Even if you read that text you're about to send. Okay, you pause before you press send. You're upset with that person. "What's my best intention?" Oh, I think I need to change the language a little bit. Let me go back and edit that thing or that email, and make the tone more appreciative or more understanding or more inviting of learning rather than being right. And people actually appreciate that a lot.

It's like what I said about anger. If you say to somebody, "I'm angry at you," you get a particular response. But if you pay attention and notice that underneath your anger you feel hurt or you feel afraid or you feel worried or disrespected, and you can say, "I'm afraid. I'm worried about this," or "I feel hurt"—they listen to you better. They want to hear what you have to say.

So you pause in the midst of communication. What's my highest intention? Oh yes, I'm going to change this a little because my intention is really to connect, or to love, or whatever your intention is. And it changes everything. You don't even change very many words. But the tone and the intention creates a very different karma. You know what I'm saying? This is a really, really useful practice.

Now in another form, there is long-term intention. Viktor Frankl, who was the founder of logotherapy, was in the concentration camps in the Second World War, and he said that the people who survived most successfully were those who had a sense of meaning and a deep intention for their life. And so what this means is you can, at some point, quiet yourself and sit and try to sense an inner direction of the values for your life.

Sometimes in the Buddhist tradition, this is described as reflecting and taking the vows toward awakening—the bodhisattva vows. They're how they start the sitting in a Zen monastery: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all. Desires are inexhaustible. I vow to transcend them all." These kinds of vows. Little vows like that.

The Dalai Lama says them in the morning when he wakes up—the ones from Shantideva: "May I be a bridge, a raft, a boat for all who need to cross the flood. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be food for the hungry. May I be a lamp for those in darkness. May I be a resting place for the weary. And may I do this for beings everywhere, as long as earth and sky and galaxies exist, until we all awaken together." Some little vow like that, right?

But of course there are modern versions of it. And I love to read Diane Ackerman, poet and friend—her school prayer version where she writes: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon, and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

And if we take time to quiet ourselves and listen, there's a kind of inner nobility to most human beings. You can start to listen to: if I were to make my own vows, what would they be? What would this be like? Because then when you go through times in your life of problems and struggles, or when the world around you is having a hard time, you can pause. And you can say, well, what really matters to me? It's like setting the compass of your heart.

Sometimes it's an activist expression. This is Barbara Widener, who founded Grandmothers for Peace. She says, "I began to question what kind of world am I leaving for my grandchildren? So I got a sign—a grandmother for peace—and stood on the street corners. And then after a year I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory. I was taken to prison, strip searched, thrown into a cell. Something happened to me. I realized they couldn't do anything more. I was free." And now Barbara and her organization, Grandmothers for Peace, works in dozens of countries around the world.

That's the activist side. That's a really beautiful thing. Thomas Jefferson said, "One person with courage is a majority." If one person stands up with that kind of courage—again, it's like Aung San Suu Kyi, or Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, or Gandhi. I think of Kenya and the woman who won the Nobel Prize for planting trees...

And she was thrown in prison. I think you need to get thrown in prison to win the Nobel Peace Prize. It's sort of part of your curriculum. But anyway, she started by planting trees along the desert for people whose villages were losing water and life. In the end, she ended up planting fifty-one million trees in Kenya.

So you do it a step at a time. And it's not that you do it in some kind of heroic, special way. You know, "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." One of the weird things you notice if you take that vow is that the people around you don't want to be saved by you—like the ones in your family. They're not interested in you saving them. So it has to mean something different than that. And what it means is that you dedicate your life, you quiet yourself, and you dedicate your life to life itself in your own version and in your own way.

And then no matter what happens, you get quiet and you say, "What is my deepest vow? What is the thing that most matters to me?" For some people, it's just as simple as "I vow to be kind." And it won't go well all the time. Somebody said, for somebody who's truly committed to changing the world nonviolently, you never need weapons, but you may need bail.

This from Thomas Merton, who was responding to a young activist. We get lots of activists who come here, often burned out activists, because you can't sustain it just on anger over the years. And he wrote: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not at times bringing about its opposite. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And so here's the secret. Everybody's waiting for the secret at the end of the day, right? The secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of the action. Because you don't get to determine how it will turn out. To act well without attachment to the results and the fruits. You can learn from the results. You can tune yourself. But in the end, that's not what's given to you. What's given to you is to act from your deepest values and from your great love.

And it can be small things as well as large. A gesture, a smile. After the Haiti earthquake, I was reading this thing from the American Red Cross, and one of the most touching things that came in, among all these millions of dollars, was an envelope with fourteen dollars and sixty cents from a homeless shelter in Baltimore with a little note that said, "We're worried about our brothers and sisters on the streets of Haiti." It can be just that moment, just that gesture. That can change somebody's life as much as anything else that you care about.

And in Zen they say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. You quiet the mind, open the heart, become loving awareness in whatever way you can. And then you get up and tend to the garden of the world, and you sweep—not because you're supposed to, but because it's your garden and it's your place. And you go back and forth between these two.

Here we are in the realm of mystery. You come to the temple and it's a reminder of this. You watch the sun—actually the sun doesn't move but the earth turns. But it looks like the sun is moving to the west now over the day. The air fortunately got clearer, at least for a time. Hopefully the fires are getting contained a little bit more. And you are here, born into the human realm with unbearable beauty and an ocean of tears. And this is it. This is how it is.

And the beautiful thing is that it's possible to awaken in this midst. All the science and neuroscience shows it—to heal, to transform, to live with a kind of nobility and dignity, to offer that to others and to offer it to the world.

passage I read not so long ago. In one of history's more unlikely acts of totalitarianism, China banned Buddhist monks in Tibet from reincarnating without government permission. According to a statement issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, the law, which went into effect a few years ago, strictly stipulates the procedures by which one is to reincarnate and is, quote, "an important move to institutionalize management of reincarnation."

So that's one approach to the mystery of life, right? Not necessarily a successful one. But there it is.

But there's another possibility. And all of these teachings of mindfulness, compassion, loving-kindness, joy, equanimity, forgiveness—we've done a lot today. They're really all invitations to return to that original goodness, to express it, to know it, to discover it in yourself and transform in some beautiful way.

I have two poems. They're both kind of wonderful. This first one is from Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian poet, wonderful poet, called "Wandering Around at Albuquerque Airport Terminal."

After learning my flight was delayed four hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4A understands Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well, one pauses these days, but since Gate 4A was my own gate, I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor wailing loudly. Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What's her problem? We told her her flight was going to be four hours late, and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke haltingly. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said, no, no, we're fine. We'll get there just late. Who's picking you up? Let's call and tell him.

We called her son. I spoke with him in English. I told him I'd stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would sit with her. Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. And then we called my dad, and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, of course, they had ten shared friends. And then I thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her?

This all took about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then, telling her life, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamoul cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag, and was offering them to all the people at the gate. To my amazement, not a single person declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the young man from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar and smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out free beverages and the flight attendants served us apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend, whose hand I had been holding, had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person at this gate, once the crying of confusion had stopped, has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They all took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other people. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

There's something so both tender and revolutionary in that poem for these times—outwardly in our world that's troubled. And we become the carriers, like that person on the boat that Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about. We become the carriers of our best intention, in our actions and our voice.

To not let the fires and the floods, the fears and confusion, take over your heart. To be that person who carries that wisdom.

So with that, I'd like us to do a little ritual to end. Several people have these little red cords. Take one and pass them around the room. When you get one, don't do anything with it yet—take one and pass the rest to other people seated near you, so pretty soon everybody will have one. And while you do, I will explain about this.

The sacred cord is used all across Asia, from Afghanistan all the way to Japan—in rituals, in weddings, in celebrations, in healing practices—because it is the symbol of a thread that connects all life. We are woven together in what Martin Luther King called "a single garment of destiny." We are all woven together in the mystery of life. We are life expressing itself in our form.

Now, the reason these are colored this reddish color is that they are considered one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun. If you choose to wear them around your wrist or your neck—I have one that I've been wearing for a long time from the Dalai Lama—it's like these are your robes, and you go into the marketplace. Your real home is in the temple. You're kind of like a monk or nun in drag. You go into the marketplace wearing your secret robes and pretend you're an ordinary person, but actually your home is in the infinite, in the vastness. Your home is in loving awareness.

To make these—they're also called protection cords—I was doing this ritual with a very famous Lama at one point, and somebody asked, "Well, what exactly do these protect you from?" And he said, "Well, yourself, of course—the main protection that human beings need."

So to make them or activate them, we have to tie three knots into them in succession. Hold them up. The first knot is called the knot of refuge. For those who are Buddhist, it means refuge in Buddha, which is to see the Buddha in every being you meet. Refuge in Dharma, which means truth and all the practices that lead you to freedom and truth.

And refuge in Sangha, or community—that we never do it alone. Every moment of your practice and all the development and awakening that happens affects your friends and your family and community and spreads out across the world. It is never done in isolation.

But for those who are not Buddhists, the knot of refuge is to take refuge in that which is sacred or holy, by whatever name you give it—all the different names in all traditions—and to realize that by taking this refuge, you remember that within you is this possibility of living with nobility and freedom and care.

So reflect for a moment on that which is sacred or holy, that which is a refuge for you. And when you're ready, tie a knot into the center of the cord, which is your reminder to live your life connected to this sense of the sacred.

Then there is a second knot to tie into the cord. This is the knot of compassion. It is, in your own way, a vow to minimize harm to yourself and others. You could call it a reverence for life—for your own life and the life of others. To not cause harm through your speech and actions, as best you can. To hold yourself and other beings with compassion.

So reflect on your own dedication, your own vow—whatever is true to you—to live in a way that does not harm yourself, that does not cause harm to others, and what that means to you. And when you're ready, tie the second knot into the cord, which is a reminder of this practice and commitment to compassion.

And the third knot will require a little bit more reflection on your part. If you were to set an intention for your life, a long-term intention—some people make it very simple: "I vow to be kind." Others, it might be more complex. But take a minute or two to reflect on what your highest or best intention might be.

Like Diane Ackerman's beautiful poem: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature and a healer of misery, messenger of wonder, architect of peace." That's her poetic version. But for you, if you were to have two or three sentences, or one, of what is your heart's deepest intention...

And when you're ready, tie the third knot in your cord, which is a reaffirmation of this vow or this intention. I would recommend that when we end, you perhaps write it down. It's very useful to have put it on paper, if you wish. Or put it in your smartphone. Sometimes when we do this, if we have more time, I'll invite people to actually read it to the person next to them, because to say it out loud is a very beautiful thing, and to have someone else read theirs.

But I would like to ask us to do something else as you finish this up. If you want to wear your blessing cord on your wrist, you can wrap it around two or three times and let the ends hang down. If you want to wear it around your neck, put it around the back of your neck and let the two ends hang down—don't tie it yet. Then, should you choose to do this, you can turn to the person sitting next to you, and they'll tie yours on and offer you some blessing, maybe silently or with a few words. Then you tie theirs on and offer them a little blessing. Turn to a person next to you or near you, or behind you, and tie on their protection cord.

Kind of nice to give a little blessing to another person, isn't it? And they need it. You know they need it.

So now as you finish up, it's five o'clock, and you've been basically patient and well-behaved today, which I appreciate. Considering the state of the world, it's not always what you get. And more than that, I hope that these teachings, which really opened a window or opened the treasury to give you a little bit of the principles of Buddhist psychology—more than anything, I hope they reminded you of what you already know. It's not like they're all that new. Somewhere in your heart you already understand this.

Whether you're a healer or a business person, an educator, an artist, or whatever your work is, a scientist—you also can understand that these are universal principles for human well-being and human happiness.

The poet writes: "Sun drapes a buttered scarf across your face. Rose opens herself to your glance, and rain shares its divine melancholy. The whole world keeps whispering or shouting to you, nibbling your ear like a neglected lover." It's time to pay attention. It's time to listen deeply. It's time to care in the ways that we really want to do, ways that our culture and speed somehow takes us away from.

And coming to the temple for a day as you have—those who are new here particularly, we welcome you, and you're welcome to come back. All kinds of other programs and trainings are offered here. Those of you who are some of our old friends for a long time, it's a pleasure to share the day. May you carry what's been a benefit out to the world.

And let's do just one minute of meditation. Last moments. Let yourself envision from your stillness and presence that you can extend loving-kindness and care out across the world, out from this room like a beacon in every direction, like a lighthouse of loving-kindness and care, so that all that we've done today becomes a source of illumination, care, and kindness that spreads across the world to everyone you touch and all whom they touch, visible and invisible. May they all be held in great loving-kindness, every

one. And even the ones that are difficult—may their hearts too find peace. May they too be free from hatred and fear. May all beings benefit from the transformation and care and the seeds of goodness that we are able to offer and plant in this world.

It's been a pleasure. I thank you.

Travel safe. May your friends in other parts of the counties nearby be safe and protected. And please come back again.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 76

The Essence of Buddhist Psychology - Daylong, Part 1 Morning

Jack Kornfield · 4h38

> *In this morning session of a daylong retreat at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield presents Buddhist psychology not as religion or philosophy, but as a practical science of mind offering tools for inner freedom and well-being. He emphasizes that these teachings recognize our fundamental dignity and goodness—a marked contrast to Western psychology's focus on pathology and diagnosis.*
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> *Kornfield introduces mindfulness as 'loving awareness,' the capacity to be present for our experience without judgment. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna teachings, he guides practitioners through awareness of breath, body, feelings, and thoughts. He shares the powerful story of George Schaller studying gorillas without a gun—approaching our own experience as a caring witness rather than trying to fix or change it. The session includes practical exercises like counting thoughts to develop the capacity to observe the mind's activity.*
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> *The teaching culminates in the RAIN practice for working with difficulties: Recognize what is happening, Accept it as it is, Investigate with curiosity (exploring body sensations, emotions, and underlying stories), and Not-identify—realizing we are not limited by our conditioning or circumstances. Through stories ranging from Nelson Mandela's dignity to a Burmese nun's healing journey, Kornfield illustrates how these trainings, now validated by neuroscience research on neuroplasticity, can transform our relationship with suffering and awaken our connection to all life.*

Good morning, everybody.

Thank you for coming out on this smoky morning to be here at Spirit Rock. My name is Romy, and I am running this event with many of my fabulous co-workers who are here today—Christina in particular is here. We also have many volunteers that came early this morning to set up the room. They're all wearing name tags, so if you have any questions or would like to thank them, they're easily identifiable.

Today I wanted to let you know that we're live streaming and we have some documentary filmmakers in the room. So if you ask questions, please wait for the mic and place it close to your mouth so we can hear you at home and in the room. Speaking of

hearing, we have assisted hearing devices available. If you are having a hard time hearing me, they're right in the back—my coworker Jesse can hand you one. They work very well.

I'm going to remind you to turn off your cell phones now while I'm thinking of it. And we have a bookstore—I don't know why I thought of that next, but there is a bookstore with volunteers there today, so please feel free to peruse. We also have Jack's new book, *No Time Like the Present*, at the bookstore.

Regarding lunch: normally I encourage you to go outside to the beautiful outdoors. We have picnic benches in the meadow across the way. However, today we're going to set up tables and chairs inside and upstairs in the East Hall, so you can stay inside if you don't want to go outside. If you forgot your lunch, Woodacre Deli is across the road—I can give you directions.

For those seeking continuing education credits, there are almost twenty of you in here, but not twenty people have signed up. So if you paid for CEs or would like continuing education credit, please stand up right now and sign up outside if you haven't already.

We will be ringing a bell when it's time to come in. We're the only ones in the building today, which is lovely. There is an upper retreat area, and it's silent up there, so I'm going to ask that if you are walking outside and you get to the wood gates, please turn around. That is where we're having a silent retreat.

Now I'd like to introduce Jack Kornfield. Thank you, Jack. Without you, none of us would be here today—or watching at home, or being part of a documentary, quite honestly. I know you were just in China, so I'm so glad you're back, and I hope to hear a little bit about your travels.

Jack Kornfield: Could I have that book? Maybe there's something good in it. Who knows? Thank you, Romy.

So good morning to you all. I'm very happy to be here. And the teaching today is one that I really enjoy doing. I've done this teaching about the essence of Buddhist psychology over a number of years, and it's a very satisfying and I hope useful set of teachings for you. There'll be a few guided meditations, but not much walking meditation, which we would normally have, partly because of the fire and so forth. And maybe we'll also have a little shorter lunch period just to kind of keep what we're doing contained.

Before I start—other than the documentary filmmakers in there who said they want to make movies of me before I die, which might be soon, but I think I'm a little longer. You know, in your seventies, you never know. Actually, you never know, period. And the teaching of one of the great Buddha sutras says that karma can change as quick as the swish of a horse's tail. And if one doesn't believe that, all you have to do is drive up the road to Sonoma and Napa, where these lives were toodling along just like everything's fine, the grape harvest, and then everything transformed. And we know this, actually.

So in part, the teachings today are also focused on how is it that we can live amidst the ever-changing world that is the reality, the impermanence, and really the tentativeness of life. Is there some way to conduct ourselves and to live with a spirit that can allow all these changes and stay wise, compassionate, centered amidst them all?

The focus today on Buddhist psychology starts with the fundamental understanding that Buddhist teachings are a science of mind. They're not so—yes, they've been used as a religion and as a philosophy, but if you read the original texts and look deeply at them, they point to the way the mind and the heart operate in this mysterious human incarnation and ways that we can learn to understand ourselves, our relationship with others, that bring inner freedom, well-being, happiness, and so forth. And the other thing that's interesting and critical about them is that they're practical. And so you'll hear as we go through the teachings today that they are experiential and that there are trainings and practices that are given that allow us to both learn and to transform our lives.

We come to a temple like this and we sit in the midst of the mystery of human incarnation. And often we go through our days kind of taking life for granted, but something greater and vaster is happening all around us all the time. This week I've been sitting with a friend who got a diagnosis of a very advanced cancer ten days ago and has about another week to live. And of course she is shocked and all the other kinds of things. And part of it was: I didn't think it would happen so quickly. But it can.

What is this human incarnation? When we look at our lives, we can either live with habit and kind of go along in a somewhat automatic way, or we can discover the possibilities of healing, well-being, inner freedom amidst all the changes of the world, and a way to hold both the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows that make up human life.

I think about the mystery of it. My sister-in-law, Esther, who died about a decade ago—I was with her quite a lot during the last stages of her cancer. And then I stayed home here, came back one night, and she was very close to dying. Got up early to rush into the city to be with her.

But I had to stop at the drugstore to pick up some prescriptions. Did it kind of hurriedly, and I was standing in line a little bit impatiently at CVS. And all of a sudden my whole body just relaxed and I said, oh, Esther died. And I got to my car and I called my brother and I said, how's Esther doing? And he said, oh, she died five minutes ago. And I said, I know.

Now, if I were to ask how many people have had experiences like that, a third of the hands would go up. Who are we? How is this possible that we can know something at a distance? Are we our bodies? Are we our feelings? Are we consciousness itself, connected in this web of life? I mean, who got born into your body? And then how do you navigate? These are the fundamental questions, the kind of questions one is asked when you come to a temple or a place of deep reflection.

I also have a poem to start with. Poetry is always good because it's kind of the music of language. It's called "The Sleepless Ones":

What if all the people who could not sleep at two or three or four in the morning left their houses and went to the parks? What if hundreds, thousands, millions went in their solitude like a stream, and each told their story? What if there were old women fearful that if they slept they would die, and young women unable to conceive, and husbands having affairs, and children who couldn't sleep because they were fearful of failing, and mothers worried about paying the bills, and women having business troubles, and men unlucky in love, and those who were in physical pain, and those who are guilty? What if they all left their houses like a stream and the moon illuminated their way, and they came each one to tell their stories? Would these be the more troubled of humanity? Or would these be the more passionate of this world? Or those who need to create to live? Or would these be the lonely ones? And I ask you, if they all came to the parks at night and told their stories, would the sun on rising be more radiant? And again, I ask you, would they embrace?

And this is us. We all have the arc of our lives and the stories that we tell inwardly and to one another. To begin to pay attention with the capacity of mindfulness and understanding to the stories that we're living out is one of the essential elements of Buddhist psychology—and to see that we share the common elements of the story with so many others. Wherever you are in the story, if you go out into the park, you can find those who have found a kind of freedom amidst the difficulties and the glories of their life.

I think about a nun I met on the northern border of Burma and China, who had been diagnosed with a very difficult and rare illness. Given the state of medical care in Burma, she did not want to have surgery. The hospitals at that time were not necessarily sterile, and it just wasn't the kind of medical care where you would want to have

surgery. So she went to see her old aunt, who was a Buddhist nun, and her aunt said, "You come live in the forest and I'll teach you healing and give you these herbs. But you have to meditate to heal yourself." This was a pretty dire situation.

She did, and she spent two years doing this healing practice. We met her sometime after she had come back, and she'd started a monastery because people wanted to know what she'd learned. She was this very bright spirit. We asked about her practice and she said yes, her aunt made her sit and meditate sixteen to eighteen hours a day for the last two years, along with taking these herbs. Her body was completely healed and cleared now. And so she had opened this temple, particularly for women who were in distress—those with mental illness, those who were homeless, those with trauma, those fleeing the civil wars around northern Burma. And she taught them all to meditate.

I thought to myself, I wouldn't necessarily invite people with mental illness, the homeless, and people with severe trauma and say, oh, come and let's sit in meditation. Then she said, "Come in." There was a meditation hall filled with a hundred or a hundred fifty women who were all sitting like statues. What it was is that this nun, this youngish woman who'd gone through all of this, had found a spirit that was so strong in herself. You came to see her—having suffered very deeply with illness and all of this—and said, you know, I'm homeless, I'm mentally ill, whatever. And she would look you in the eyes and say, "You can do this." It was like her spirit was stronger than their problems. It was really quite extraordinary.

When we were walking out—I was there with my beloved Trudy, my wife—

An old woman with just a couple of teeth came up and grabbed Trudy, didn't speak much English. She'd obviously been through very, very hard times. She held Trudy's arm and then looked at her and pointed to herself and said, "Peace of mind, peace of mind." And you could see that her life had been changed by being there.

So this is really the beginning of Buddhist psychology—to recognize that no matter what our circumstance, there's a possibility of inner freedom and of well-being, no matter whether it's physical difficulties or the outer changes that come so often to us. And when we move through life lost in the small perspective, caught up in our fear, depression, anger, anxiety, suffering, and so forth, Buddhist psychology opens us to a wider and bigger training.

I think of Thubten Jinpa, who was here last year. He's the translator for the Dalai Lama, a wonderful young lama himself. He helps run the CCare training at Stanford that he started, which has eight-week programs in compassion and mindfulness. He tells the story of one doctor who went through the training. The man was in his fifties, a

physician at Stanford, and he was depressed and burned out. The medical system was so hard. He was seeing so many patients, so much stress. He was just kind of finished and undermined in some way by how demanding and difficult it was.

Then he went through this eight-week training in compassion and mindfulness, and he found a way to come back to himself, to regulate himself, to see anew. When he returned to his medical practice, an old woman who'd been a patient for a long time came in and said, "Doctor, you seem different today. What happened to you? Are you in love or something?" And he laughed because, of course, he was in love—but it was in love with life again in some very deep way.

Buddhist psychology is, in essence, a positive psychology, a psychology of human dignity and goodness. We are not limited by our circumstance or our history. When Nelson Mandela walked out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island Prison with so much dignity and magnanimity and graciousness, he not only inspired South Africa but really changed the imagination of the world. He showed that they can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit.

It begins with something Nelson said at one point: "It never hurts to see the good in someone. They often act the better because of it." And so all the trainings and practices are to awaken us to what is called our fundamental dignity and our fundamental goodness.

This is really in contrast to Western psychology, where if you read from the Freudian beginnings, it's a medical model. Almost all the focus is on disease and pathology and healing people, getting better from your diagnosis. Of course there's the DSM manual—you get diagnosed and you get a number for your particular diagnosis. It's all categorized, your particular disorder. And it helps the insurance industry figure out how much to pay to get you better or something like that. That's become our mental health.

Along with this, there was a front page of one of the sections of the Wall Street Journal that said, "So Young and So Many Pills." More than almost a third of our children, counting teens, take regular prescriptions such as ADHD medication, antidepressants, antipsychotics, and things like that. That's how we're responding to our human situation.

There is another way. It's not that there aren't appropriate times for medication, or that we don't need to organize our medical system. But there's something more than this—the ability to see the fundamental goodness and dignity of a human being, and to see that their trauma and their grief or their anxiety is not who they really are. It's a visitor. This is extraordinarily healing.

When the Dalai Lama takes your hand—which he does when he goes and teaches with different groups, he likes to go down and greet people—the remarkable thing about it is that he doesn't let go. You're there and the Dalai Lama comes, and if you're in the line, he takes your hand. I've taught with him, so I've had the fortune of good time around him, and he's quite a wonderful presence. He takes your hand and you think, "This is great. Dalai Lama looks in my eyes, blessing, nice and very good vibrations." And then he doesn't let go. You think it's like the politician kissing babies and moving down the row, seeing how many people he can greet. But that's not how it happens. He holds on until you really get it—that he's there with you. And you go, "Oh, wow."

And then he looks again at you. We really connected. Old friends, okay. And only then does he move on to the next person. There's something about the depth of that connection that is almost more powerful in healing than any other intervention we can have—to be seen and met in that way.

There's a story that I love, a true story of a schoolteacher in Ohio, a high school teacher. One day when her math class was really rowdy, she stopped the lesson. No one was going to learn math. She put the thirty-one names of all the students in the class on the blackboard and said, "For the rest of the period, write these names down and then put next to each name one good thing that you admire or like about this person." Then she collected all those papers.

Some months later, maybe before Easter vacation when the class was again not focused, she stopped the class and passed out papers. She'd cut apart all the original comments and pasted them on a page with each person's name at the top—the different good things that had been written about them by the other thirty students.

A couple of years later, she got a call from a woman who said, "You know Robert, who was in your class. I know he was one of your favorite students. My son was in the military and he was just killed in the Middle East." Very sad. She told the teacher about the memorial, so she went. Toward the end, they were standing at graveside, and the mother said, "I have to talk to you. My son only carried a few things on the battlefield with him, and this is one." She pulled out that page, obviously folded and unfolded many times—the thirty-one good things that people had seen in him.

Then a young woman standing next to them, who'd also been a student, said, "Oh yeah, I always carry mine too," and pulled it out of her purse. Another young man on the other side said, "I made it part of my wedding vows."

There is something so remarkable about seeing what is called in the mystical tradition the secret beauty of another being—to see in their eyes the spirit that was born into them, to see their goodness. This has a very powerful transformative effect.

So now I invite you for a moment to reflect on this and then take a look around—not in a weird way. I mean, you're weird enough as you are without adding to it. But just imagine that you can see, like the Dalai Lama, that you're secretly the Dalai Lama or whoever it is, and you can simply see the beauty and the dignity and the secret beauty of each face you look at. Just look around a little bit. The seeds of goodness that were born into each person. Notice what it's like to see people with these eyes.

I read of a hospital chaplain who twice a year would go through the hospital and bless the hands of all the people who worked there. She would hold their hands and bless them for their work—the surgeons and the physicians and the ICU nurses, of course. But she said it was equally important to go into the basement and find those people who were washing the dishes, and the ones who went upstairs to mop the floors and clean the bathrooms, who were often so unrecognized. She would hold their hands, and she said it was so touching because after she'd done this a number of rounds, they would wait half a year for the day she would come through and hold and bless their hands. Someone told her, "This was one of the most meaningful things that happened to me all year long—that someone sees me and honors me and values me."

We need this in some way for our spirit, for our soul.

Now, the question is how to live in this way and how to awaken these capacities. It's not so easy in the modern world. Albert Einstein said—at least according to Scientific American, which is a reasonably authoritative source—"If you can drive safely while kissing a girl, you're simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves."

Our attention is split. We actually now have a new posture. We gradually learned to stand upright as human beings, but now I watch people walking down the street and their posture is like this, hunched over their smartphones.

But there is something in what Einstein said about the capacity to pay attention where we are that changes everything. And the possibility of awakening, which is at the heart of Buddhist psychology, is offered in a wide range of trainings and tools—trainings in mindfulness, training in forgiveness, training in lovingkindness and compassion, training of attention to the body and to the stories that we tell, and also connection to one another in deep ways.

A couple of years ago I was teaching at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering, which I'm sorry to say I don't think is going to be happening again soon. Just leave that aside. Whatever your politics, you are welcome here. We really welcome everyone to feel at home here. But that doesn't seem to be the direction right now at the White House.

It was meaningful to talk about the principles of wise society, which exist in Buddhist teachings. The Buddha met with kings and ministers and princes, and he taught that a society that respects each member, that cares for the sick and the young and the elderly, those who are vulnerable, will prosper and not decline. A society where people come together and listen to each other with care, that protects the environment around them.

These are universal principles you find in every great spiritual tradition. But the thing that was different, what I could say after laying out these principles, is that in the Buddhist teaching of the science of mind, there are ways to actually do it. It's not just that it's a lovely philosophy, but there are ways to train people, to train our own hearts and minds, so that these capacities grow in us.

And we know this because now in ten thousand school systems and in thousands of hospitals and clinics, mindfulness-based interventions and social and emotional learning are happening—mindfulness in business, in the arts, and even in athletics. The Seattle Seahawks, when they won their Super Bowl, and the Chicago Bulls and the LA Lakers in all their championship years, had a meditation coach, a friend of mine, George Mumford. It helped a lot of them. Though my friend George said Michael Jordan didn't really need that—he had his own way.

But in general, these practices have spread very, very widely because of the neuroscience showing that these trainings and capacities fit with neuroplasticity. In the last few decades there was a revolution in neuroscience, which had thought that the brain and the nervous system reset when you're young and that's it—too bad. But as we now know, every way that we pay attention, the way that we use our own attentional capacity, is rewiring our nervous system and our brain.

If you read things like Norman Doidge, who wrote the great New York Times bestseller *The Brain That Changes Itself*, you start to see all the science of this neuroplasticity. Or you look at what Adam Gazzaley at UCSF does in mental trainings and the results of it—the cover of *Nature* magazine on new capacities to change the brain. Or Justin Rhodes at University of Illinois, who documents neurogenesis from mental training, showing that new neurons are growing as well as new synaptic connections.

And then there's the genetic level of it. Elizabeth Blackburn, who won the Nobel Prize and who's here at the UC Medical Center together with Elissa Epel—she won the Nobel Prize for telomeres, for the caps at the end of your chromosomes that protect them. As they wear down, so too your physical well-being diminishes until you die. And she showed, and it really boggled her mind, that after eight weeks of meditation, telomeres grew. We have these capacities to change the epigenetics and the way that our genes are operating through our attention.

The start is mindfulness, which I will call loving awareness—and you'll understand why as we go on. The capacity to be present where we are, present for our experience, rather than just wandering or spaced out in various ways.

When I work as a therapist, or when I have, I have my clients come in and we sit together to start. They don't have to be Buddhists—spare their friends and family—but we want them to be Buddhists. It's a much better kind of endeavor. And we don't make it into some special meditative thing. It's just to quiet down and pay attention to what's going on, so that when we do start to work together, there's a sense of connection. Otherwise people come in and somebody just cut them off on the highway and they had a little argument at work that morning, and you get a kind of superficial connection. But in five minutes of being together and getting silent, there grows a capacity to connect, from which all the deeper work can happen.

And then people will ask, "How do I do this more? How do I learn?" So I begin to train them in mindfulness. But it's not that easy. People are often not very embodied in our culture. You know the line from James Joyce where he writes, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." There's that kind of non-embodiedness.

And then my humorist friend who lives in Fairfax, Anne Lamott, writes: "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone." So you sit and meditate and you've got to find your body. And then you look at your mind and go, "Oh dear," or whatever.

So the first task in teaching mindfulness is to teach people how to be aware without judging and fixing and resisting and grasping—not to make it a self-improvement project, but rather to develop the ability just to become the loving witness of this human life. Which changes everything. Because usually we're trying to fix it.

As the author Florida Scott-Maxwell writes, "No matter how old a mother is, she looks to her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." And we've internalized that. "Okay, now I'm going to meditate and get better"—whatever your idea of better is.

The practice of mindfulness and this fundamental loving awareness training is about being spacious and gracious with what's actually true in your human life. And people don't tell us to do this very much. It's always like you've got to fix yourself and get more and do more and have more—that's our culture. This is more like being.

And we use the images of sitting like a mountain with all the weather changes, or resting like a butterfly on a flower—not changing the flower, but simply being there—and beginning to sense the breath, your life breath, as it comes in and out as a way to connect body and mind. In doing so, the breath becomes a kind of mirror.

Mullah Nasruddin, a Sufi holy man and sage from the Middle East, went into a bank to cash a check one day, and they said, "Could you please identify yourself?" So he reached into his pocket, pulled out a small mirror, looked at it, and said, "Yep, that's me all right."

What mindfulness begins to do, as we start to train our attention to be quite present—often beginning with this very universal and simple practice of being aware that your body is breathing—is that the breath then becomes a kind of mirror. As you feel the breath, you notice the longing or the anxiety or the peacefulness or the frustration, all the different states of the heart and mind. You notice the tension in the body. You begin to notice what's actually going on in a way that we often don't pay attention to. And without this awareness, it's not possible to really live in a free way. We're otherwise just in reaction to what's coming.

Sometimes in working with the breath, there will be phrases or words that are invited. You can say to yourself softly—*calm* or *centered* or *ease*—with each breath, a kind of invitation to quiet the mind somewhat. And as you sit, even in the beginning, you'll feel the body's pains and tensions as they show themselves. We carry these in our physical body; trauma and so forth, it's all here. Or you'll notice the moods you have. You start to sense the unfinished business of the heart. If there's grieving—if you know there's been a loss and you've been so busy running around—you sit, and perhaps the tears will come because you're finally paying attention. Or longing, or all kinds of other experiences.

My friend Malidoma Somé, a West African shaman and medicine man, when he first came here from Burkina Faso—he's of the Dagara people—had gone through this great shaman's training. He also has a couple of PhDs, one from the Sorbonne and one from a university in the United States, but he's mostly a shaman. He said, "I came out of the shaman's training and I walked through your streets, and your streets are full of the ungrieved dead." What he meant was that he could somehow see the spirits—homeless people who died, people who died in ICUs, taken care of in caring ways by the nurses

and staff but whose family wasn't there, people who died in old age homes. He said, "In our culture, we grieve and honor each person. That's a deliberate part of our Dagara people's way of moving through the world. We celebrate each birth, and we also celebrate the life at the end of it. Your culture has lost its attention to grief, and because of it, it still carries the grief in an unhealthy way."

So when you sit and you're quiet, the unfinished business of the heart starts to arise. And then you see the mind. There's a cartoon in the *New Yorker* that shows a car crossing the Utah desert with a roadside sign that reads: "Your own tedious thoughts, next 200 miles." That's kind of what meditation is like, because you start to see your racing mind and all that it does.

What you do in establishing loving awareness is to notice what's present without reacting to it. You notice the racing mind, the tears, the longing, whatever experiences arise, the tension. And almost as if to bow to it, you simply acknowledge that this is the way it is. It's like this right now. You start to feel experiences rise and fall, just as the breath rises and falls, comes and goes. You let these experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

The research of people like Richie Davidson shows an increased capacity to approach challenges when you train in mindfulness, because these difficulties come. In the neuroscience language, you expand the window of tolerance. Dan Siegel also uses that phrase. You become able to bear the tears. Or for some people, it's joy—some people are so loyal to their suffering that it's scary to let themselves feel happy or well. By expanding the window of tolerance, you learn how to be present for life without so much judgment, contraction, fear, and aversion. This is what makes up our human life. And that already starts to invite a kind of wellbeing and freedom.

So let's do a little sitting, a little meditation together—maybe ten minutes or so. Do you want to stand up and stretch for a moment? You've been sitting for a while. And when you're ready, let yourself sit back down.

Many of you, probably most of you, already have an established mindfulness practice. But we'll just practice together for a little bit—this first training of loving awareness, bringing together the breath and body experience and the mind.

So when you're ready, let your eyes close gently. From the earliest teachings of the science of mind, there is a most wonderful way for human beings to establish clarity and wellbeing.

to overcome the difficulties of suffering and grief, to find an inner freedom of heart and mind. And this is the establishment of mindfulness, of mindful awareness—this great human capacity.

So you sit now and begin to let yourself notice the experiences of just being seated halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. And bring a kind attention. Mindfulness as loving awareness. Simply notice the state of your body right now. And also notice what other moods might be present, the state of the heart. And the kind of thoughts that are arising and passing—all without judgment, just noticing.

With loving awareness, you become the witness to body and heart and mind. And then you notice how easy it is to drift off into thinking and remembering and analyzing. So to stay present, let yourself become aware of your body's breathing, this universal movement of breath. You can feel it as coolness in the nostrils, or swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. And if it's difficult to feel your breath, you can put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand, and just leave it there.

With each breath, invite a sense of calm or ease. And let the other experiences—sounds and feelings and thoughts—let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Just bring your attention gently back to this breath, again and again returning to it as a first step in training mindfulness. Come back to the breath each time the attention wanders, quite gently, like training the puppy—sit, stay—very kindly.

Notice the breath from the beginning through the middle to the end of the in-breath, or rising. Notice if there's a space between breaths, and you can just relax in that stillness. Notice the appearance of the out-breath, or the falling of chest and belly. As you feel the whole rhythm of breath, invite a sense of steadiness, calm, or ease. This breath.

Now, it's easy in meditation and in this training to set a goal and then use it to evaluate yourself. And of course, to steady the mind or to be able to concentrate a bit more on the breath through training becomes possible. But it has to happen in an organic way, not through your strivings. It comes more when you simply are willing to pay attention to what's happening. And sometimes it will be the breath. But sometimes what you notice as you sit quietly is that you're sleepy. Or you notice that you're concerned or worried about something. Or you're restless. All of those are absolutely natural.

The image or story that may be helpful is of Professor George Schaller, who was one of the most important primate biologists ever. He was the mentor to Dian Fossey, whose story was told in that movie *Gorillas in the Mist*, played by Sigourney Weaver. Dr. Schaller came back from one of his trips in Africa and made a presentation to a huge

gathering, a conference of field biologists. He talked about the gorillas—how they lived together, what was the role of the young males, the big silverback males' relationship to the females, who raised the children, the aunties and the mothers—all of the family structure and community.

People raised their hands. They said, "Wait a second, Dr. Schaller. We've been studying these creatures for years, a couple of hundred years with our kind of European scientific view. And nobody ever had this level of information. How did you learn so much about the gorillas?"

And he said, "It was simple. I didn't carry a gun."

The previous generations of biologists had all been frightened by these giant creatures, so they went in carrying elephant guns, basically. Now, if you were a gorilla and you saw some guy coming in carrying a big gun—how would you feel? So they couldn't really get very close to them. But Schaller, because he didn't carry a gun, had to come in very respectfully and slowly, eyes downcast. It turns out the primate biologist at the San Francisco Zoo taught me about how you approach gorillas. You kind of sidle in, keep your eyes down. If you want their attention, you clear your throat like that, and then they'll look up if you wanted something.

But anyway, Schaller had to approach very slowly and carefully and respectfully. And the gorillas could feel it. After a while, when they realized he wasn't going to harm them, they let him just sit there in the middle, and he could take his notes and observe everything that they were doing, learning so much because he wasn't trying to do anything. He simply became the caring witness of their life.

And in the same way, mindfulness—you start with the breath—is really an invitation to approach your own body and mind as a caring witness, which is partly why we're talking about it as a loving awareness. Then you notice, oh, sleepiness—that's not a failure. It's just your body's tired. Maybe you've been running yourself around a lot, or not sleeping much, or whatever the causes may be. But you notice it. Or restlessness, or anxiety, or whatever. You simply sit in the middle of it all and allow yourself to be present for this.

And then the beautiful thing is you can't do it wrong, because there's not something that's supposed to be happening. What is happening is the subject of your attention, in the way that Schaller gave attention to see what was happening among the gorillas. Your gorilla nature displays itself.

I was leading a seminar over at Berkeley, at the Berkeley Law School, on mindfulness and the law. There had been a whole big gathering of lawyers and judges and law professors. One man who was a judge said he'd been a meditator for quite a while, and when he was appointed to sit on the bench, he thought, "Hmm, sit on the bench—I know how to sit." So he connected the two.

And this is his instructions to the juries: "I want you to listen to what will be presented in this courtroom with total attention. You may find it helpful to sit in a posture that embodies dignity and presence and to stay in touch with the feeling of your breath coming in and out as you listen to the evidence. Be aware of the tendency of mind to jump to conclusions before all the evidence has been presented and the final arguments made. As best you can, suspend judgment and simply witness with your full being what's being presented in the courtroom moment to moment. If you find your attention wandering, you can always bring it back to your breathing and to what you're hearing, over and over again if necessary. When the presentation of evidence is complete, it will then be your turn to deliberate together as a jury and come to a decision—but not before."

That's the kind of jury I want when they call me into court. But you can hear the spirit of mindfulness, which is very different than the way we tend to approach other things in our life. The invitation of it is really to learn, to discover. And there's a kind of freedom in it.

Now, as we go on, it turns out that mindfulness has to be married to compassion and loving-kindness. When we first taught these practices—my colleagues like Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, and so forth, we all had our training in the 1960s and early seventies in Southeast Asia and India. When we first taught them, because I'd trained in an ascetic forest monastery and there was an ethos of a kind of warrior quality of training—sit up all night, don't move, really be mindful—it didn't work very well here. It got conflated with American values of striving and ambition. People thought, "Okay, I want to get enlightened," and the more they wanted to get enlightened, the tighter they became. Or they saw it as, "I've got to be on my breath, I've got to pay attention," and then they judged themselves all the time. It amplified their self-criticism. "Not only am I not good outside, but I'm also a failure as a meditator." They could see all this trouble in their mind, and it amplified all of that.

There was this famous dialogue we had with the Dalai Lama in the late eighties, asking about how you deal with self-hatred in Tibet, in training. And he was completely confused. There is no word for self-hatred in Tibetan. "What do you mean, self-hatred?" It took a long time for the translator to kind of get through to him. Finally, he looked up

and said, "But this is a mistake. Why would anyone do this?" He asked our group, "How many of you have had experiences of self-hatred and lots of self-criticism, self-judgment?"

Almost all the teachers' hands went up that were in the circle. He said, "Oh, okay, I see. You have new problems here." We have lots of new problems, right?

So in fact, from the beginning in Buddhist psychology, compassion and awareness are woven together. Because in order to be present for experience, there has to be some element of kindness. Otherwise, you're judging it. This is good, that's not. I want more of this, I want less of that. But if you bring them together as loving awareness, then you're able to be present without manipulating or being in conflict with the experience the way that it is. And that gives you both more understanding and also becomes the ground, as you'll see later, for making healthier changes.

The studies of people like Antoine Lutz and Richie Davidson show that with very simple training, people can have much greater access to compassion. Like that doctor I told you about at Stanford. Or this letter, if I can find it.

"Dear Jack, I just want to express how grateful I am now to be aware of you. I found you through Duncan Trussell's podcast, and little by little the ideas of having compassion for yourself kept inching their way to what I guess is my heart. You've soothed me in darker days and given me a glimpse into a more loving reality for myself.

"Tonight I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided after hearing you speak through my phone for months and months, I would finally give in and just sit with myself for a while. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the twenty-one years I've lived so far."

This is a young man. "For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I've latched onto, my hatred, my anxiety, pain, and everything else I criticize myself about—with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I just finally got some relief with what I felt inside and want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you very much."

It doesn't take that much sometimes, but it does take an invitation and a direction—this is what's possible.

So when people come to see us, those half or three quarters of you that are therapists or healers—just sort of the average in Marin County anyway—they carry their measure of human pain, their anxiety, their confusion. And the big question is, how do they touch it? With judgment? With fear? With overwhelm? With trying to get rid of it in some way? Or is there another way to be present for this story, for you?

This is from an acquaintance who's a teacher and a poet named Oriah Mountain Dreamer. She was leading a kind of New Age meditation seminar up in Canada.

At the end of a very long day, a small, thin woman in an oversized parka introduced herself as Isabel. "Can I do this meditation on my own?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm sure you can, although many people find it easier to establish a meditation practice with the help of a group. It's just hard to keep the discipline going on your own."

"But what will it give me? What will I get if I do this every day?" Her tone took on a whining quality, and I felt my irritation rise as she continued. "How fast will it work? Will I feel a difference after a week? How will I know it's working?"

This was exactly the kind of thing I detested. The quest for the quick fix, the guaranteed outcome, the simple answer—do this and you get that. My two young boys were waiting for me, and I just wanted to get home.

So I took a deep breath, looked directly at Isabel, and set my knapsack down on the floor. I tried to slow down my words, thinking that maybe if I spoke slower, I would feel more patient. "Well," I said, "meditation is more a process than a goal-oriented activity. It can help you become more aware of what's going on within and around you, and this can help reduce stress. My best advice is to try it and just be patient with yourself."

Of course, we're always teaching people what we need to learn in ourselves.

I picked up my bag and started to button my coat. I really did have to leave, and I wanted to get out of there while I was feeling virtuous for not snapping her head off.

But as I started to move away, Isabel suddenly reached out and grabbed my arm with surprising strength.

"But what I want to know," she said, her voice rising in a crescendo that bordered on real panic, "is will it help me find God? If I meditate, will I have an experience of something or someone out there listening, somebody really with me?"

A wave of desperation swept out from her through me, and I was surprised to find my eyes filled with tears. This woman wasn't looking for an easy answer or a guaranteed formula because she was lazy. She didn't want a simple plan because she was unable or unwilling to think critically about what would work. She wanted something she knew would work, and work quickly, because she was hanging on by her fingernails. She wanted something that would work in a week because she was afraid that she simply wasn't going to make it through months or years.

I put my hand gently over Isabel's where it gripped my arm. "It's okay, Isabel. We all feel desperate at times," I said. "Nobody does it by themselves. We all need help."

Her hand relaxed a little beneath mine, and she started to cry. We talked a while longer.

There is no "them" out there. It's only us. When I left, I did not leave one of them. I said goodbye to one of us—a human being doing the best she can, searching for the home for which all human hearts long.

And so the spirit of Buddhist psychology is to approach our human life with a fundamental compassion. Because everybody struggles. We are all in Isabel's place at some time or other. To see the beauty of a human being and also to see the difficulty in their life, as in all lives, gives us a different kind of connection and an entirely different way to hold it.

And it turns out, equally importantly, that it's not just personal but collective. As we can see, no amount of outer development—nanotechnology and computers, the whole world wide web, space technology, biotechnology, extraordinary things, the great library of Alexandria in my pocket along with a lot of bad YouTube videos—none of that outer technology, however cool it is, is going to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing environmental destruction, continuing tribalism. Those spring from the human heart. And we're now at the point where the enormous outer developments have to be matched by inner development of humanity.

As the chairman of a previous generation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, "We are a nation of nuclear giants and ethical infants." And so the training that you do in your own meditation or your own inner practice, or that you invite others to do, is not just personal for them or their families but is also profoundly political.

And here we have these huge fires that are happening, but we don't just have fires. We also have tremendous upheaval in our body politic and in our social contracts. Whether it's healthcare or immigration or foreign policy—"Oh yeah, let's nuke North Korea, that would be an interesting thing to do to stop them from having nuclear

weapons." Somehow, when kids are in kindergarten and they start hitting each other with blocks, you say, "Use your words," right? Could we maybe bring that up a little bit to the world leader level?

And of course, as wise commentators on the political world will say—H.L. Mencken, who was a great commentator, said the whole aim of politics is to frighten you, and therefore gain your support. We can feel how there is a movement—terrorism and this and that—all kinds of things that are trying to frighten us. The point of mindfulness practice is to not let the outer suffering and terror colonize your heart. Because it doesn't have to. And to not buy into what, having just come back from China, I would have to say here is the propaganda.

There's another way to express this, and it comes from James Baldwin, who writes, "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

Human life is insecure. Security is a superstition—it's just not real. As Helen Keller said, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

fed stories of terror and fear, married to our own lack of inner stability and all the outer changes—Are we going to lose our jobs? Are we going to lose our power? Is our community going to be taken over by somebody else?—all the kinds of fears that get stirred up, a lot of what happens in society then gets projected on others.

So we have the enemy du jour. We had the communists, the socialists. Long ago it was the Germans and the Japanese, generations back. Then it's the immigrants, or the Muslims, or the gays. And now I think Russia is coming back as a kind of favored enemy. The military loves that, because terrorism you don't really need aircraft carriers for. But Russia—now there's an enemy you can kind of get behind and have huge need for armaments.

What Baldwin is saying is that if we can't tolerate the reality that life is uncertain, if we can't find what's called the wisdom of insecurity, if we can't find a steadiness in ourselves, then we not only project it on others, but we create a social construct of fear. So there's something deeply political as well as personally transformative in learning and undertaking these practices.

How do we do this? The very first mindfulness and loving awareness practices are trainings in non-harming. One sets an inner intention to not bring harm to other beings, reminded that this is possible for us as a way to live. And that includes ourselves.

There are practices of gratitude. There are practices of reverence for life. May I meet each being with respect. When you take a vow, when you recite this, when you undertake this as part of your mindfulness and compassion training—that I will be compassionate to others and myself because human life is hard—it changes everything.

In the trainings I had in the monastery, you didn't want to hurt even the littlest creatures. And your whole consciousness changed because you could feel the web of life. There's a poem from Lloyd Reynolds, who was the greatest American calligrapher, a teacher of Steve Jobs with that fantastic aesthetic. He writes: "A bug crawls over the paper. Leave him be. We need all the readers we can get." There's just something in it about a reverence for life that is the beginning of the training in compassion, of not harming.

Basically, it's hard to sit and meditate after a day of killing and stealing. It just doesn't work. It's rather upsetting to the heart and the psyche. So you say, if you want to learn how to be wise and present, the first step is attention to not harm yourself and not harm others.

The not harming yourself is equally important. I get people who are cutting, who are doing all kinds of self-destructive things, because that's the only way they can tolerate their pain. It's not judging, but rather it becomes an invitation in working with people: Does this lead to happiness or to suffering? What would the wisest and most caring figure want for you as a teenager, as a human being? Underlying all of it is to hold the vulnerability, the hurt, the pains, the confusion in compassion. Not harm.

The beautiful thing is that compassion is natural, and it can be strengthened. It's there in us. You know the studies—from infant studies at Yale to studies of rats at the University of Chicago—where if there's a rat trapped in a very tight cage and can't get out, and there's a free-roaming rat, and they give it some chocolate chips, favorite of rats, and there's a lever that the rat can learn to press to release the squealing rat that's uncomfortable—when they find out they can do it, they always do it. And they save chocolate chips for them. I mean, if rats can do it, come on.

My favorite kindergarten teacher, Peggy, who's at Cascade Canyon in Fairfax—one of the world's great kindergarten teachers—during the build-up to the Iraq War, there were, for whatever reason, some military planes, transport planes, flying out of the East Bay and coming low over Marin. The kids were out on the playground, and they were really scared.

They're noisier than normal planes, and they were clearly military planes—army planes or air force planes. The children came running in and said, "Peggy, what is this?" And she said, "Well, you've heard there might be a war in Iraq." And of course little kids pay attention to this, even five-year-olds, because it's on the television and their parents are talking about it. They knew. And they said, "Peggy, what's on those planes? Are there bombs?" Maybe. "Are there guns on those planes?" Maybe. "Soldiers?" Maybe. All kinds of weapons.

And then one of the kids said, "Well, are there kids like us in Iraq?" And Peggy said, "Yes, there are." And then he said, "Well, they must not know that. They wouldn't bring bombs and guns to hurt children like us. We have to let them know."

And so all the kids went out on the playground at the next break, and they got that kind of butcher paper, and they made a huge sign. "How do you spell Iraq, Peggy?" I-R-A-Q. And then a big picture of a kid, a child, fifteen feet tall—so that it was big enough that the pilots could see it from the air, so that they would know that there were children there and they wouldn't hurt them.

This is born in us—to be caring beings for one another when we're not so frightened. And what happens is, you know, it's there in the mirror neurons where we resonate with what's happening to another near us, in Rizzolatti's studies that go back decades. But the beautiful thing is that this capacity can be awakened through systematic practice.

I'll tell you one more story, one of the ones that I tell very often. I was leading a teaching on compassion with Pema Chödrön, who's a wonderful Western Tibetan nun, in the city. And it was a big evening—we had two or three thousand people come together. After teaching about compassion, we took questions, and a woman stood up, a young woman, very shaky. It was a difficult time for her because her partner had just committed suicide ten days before. She was shaky and vulnerable and sad and confused.

Suicide is a really confusing thing for people because there is grief, but there's also guilt. Should I have done something different? And there's anger. How could they? And loss. All these different complex emotions that come up, and they are profound. So Pema had her stop and just feel her breath and hold all of that with a deep compassion. It was quite beautiful.

And then I felt how alone she was. So I asked how many other people in that room had experienced the death by suicide of a family member or someone they were very close to. And I don't know, maybe two hundred people raised their hands or stood up—

eight percent or something like that. And I said, "Let's just pause. I want you to turn your attention to this young woman." And then I said to her, "I want you to look around at all these people who've experienced what you're experiencing."

In that moment, it was as if the room turned into some great temple. There was silence, and there was so much compassion and love and tenderness for the shared suffering of their lives that it was not only palpable for her, but for all of us who were there as witnesses to it.

And this is really who we are. The compassion itself wants to come forth to hold the struggles of human incarnation. It is said in the metaphor for Buddhist psychology that to have a free heart or free spirit, there are two wings on which you fly. One is the wing of wisdom or understanding that sees things clearly. And the other is the wing of loving-kindness or compassion that holds it all with tenderness.

So now, let your eyes close gently when you're ready. It'll be ten minutes or so. And because it's often difficult for people to start with trainings in compassion or loving-kindness for themselves—for that issue of self-judgment and self-criticism—you'll hear pedagogically how we start with others and then move it back to ourselves.

Let your eyes close gently. First, just come back to the breath, and to being seated here in a simple, present way.

And feel how you treasure your own life. You know, if you were to step out in the street and a car came rushing around the corner, how you would jump back on the curb—because you do value your life and guard it in the face of trouble and sorrows. Feel your heartbeat and the life within you.

And now bring to mind someone who you love dearly. Picture them, remember them, think of them. And even if it's a little complicated relationship, this is someone you love. Feel your natural caring for them as you remember and picture them. Notice how you hold them in your heart.

And as you become aware of them and see them in your mind's eye, let yourself be aware of their measure of sorrows, as in all human lives—the sufferings they carry, some of which they may never have told anyone, the struggles or fears or hurts that are part of their life like all human lives. And as you see and sense their measure of suffering, their struggles or fears, notice how your heart opens naturally with caring, with well-wishing. And when they're having a really hard time, how natural it is to extend comfort, to be touched by their pain and to respond with compassion. What can I do to help?

And now add to this natural response the inner whispering of some phrases of compassion: May you be held in compassion. May all your struggles and sorrows be held in compassion. May your pain and sorrows be eased. May your heart be at peace. May you be held in compassion. May your pain and sorrows be eased. May your heart be at peace.

And now picture another person that you love, have them stand next to this first one. And let yourself also sense their measure of struggles and sorrows, their hurts and fears that they may never even give voice to, but that all human beings carry. May you too be held in great compassion. May your pain and sorrow be eased. May your heart be at peace.

And as you feel the tenderness toward these two loved ones, now imagine that they are gazing back at you with the same care. Imagine their eyes on you and they see your own struggles. They see your measure of tears and sorrows or hurts that you may never have given voice to. And they wish to you: May you too hold yourself in great compassion. May your pain and sorrows be eased. They wish for you: May your heart be at peace.

And you take in their care and compassion, how much they care for you. And then you can even put your hand on your heart if you wish and bring that care into yourself. May I hold myself with great compassion. May my pain and sorrows be eased. My fears. May I be at peace. May I live with a peaceful heart.

And you allow a deep sense of caring to grow. May I hold myself with great compassion. May my pain and struggles be eased. May my heart be at peace.

And know that this spirit of compassion in you can then be extended. If we had time to continue this practice, you could picture other loved ones and friends, family and community, one at a time or in groups, and extend this invitation of compassion to all who suffer—until you could even bring in the difficult people, all those into the brotherhood and sisterhood of all beings.

Let yourself feel how the beauty of every being brings you joy, and how the suffering of beings touches your heart, makes you weep. This practice brings a tenderhearted connection with all creatures and all life.

And staying with the compassion, let your eyes open. Just for a minute, gaze around with that care for all those seated around you—a sense of compassion for everybody's struggles, because they all have them, you know. And feel the natural well-wishing.

May you hold yourself in compassion, every one of you. And may your struggles and sorrows be eased, and your heart be at peace.

This is one of a series of trainings that most of you are familiar with—loving kindness, compassion, forgiveness, joy, gratitude. There's a whole series of these trainings. And what's important is that they are practice.

Sometimes you do it and it opens your heart and you think, "Oh yes, I want to live this way." It feels very good. Sometimes you do it and it feels kind of mechanical. Okay, it's a practice. I'm doing it, but I don't feel very much. Sometimes you do it and it brings up the opposite: "I hate these people. I'm never going to feel compassion for them. Not after what they did." It can bring up all kinds of things. It's a kind of purification that shows you what's in your heart.

And what you don't want to do is use it to judge yourself. If you struggle with it or it feels mechanical or brings up the opposite, you want to hold just what so—all of that—with compassion. Because the point isn't to perfect yourself. You've tried that for a while now. You go to the gym, you work out, you go to therapy, you're on a good diet—all that stuff. And it helps a little bit. I know it does, but only a little bit.

The point isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love, to be able to meet this world with a loving heart. And so instead of judging yourself, you let this spirit of compassion grow because you do it over and over again if you take it as a practice. And when you've done it twenty or fifty or a hundred times, your way of holding yourself starts to change, and your way of holding the suffering of others changes. It begins to transform the way you move through the world.

I'm aware as we come back after that compassion practice of all the people that I know, and that probably many of you know, who are up in Napa and Sonoma and Mendocino, and how important it is, as we hold them in our minds and hearts, that we also extend that compassion and that spirit to them. People who've lost everything, whose homes or businesses are just completely gone—their struggles become part of our practice. We can go further with it, but it seems really important to acknowledge and name it as we're doing this. It's not something in a vacuum but very much connected to what's happening in the world.

Just take a pause for a moment and see how you are, how these teachings sound to you.

A question came: "When working with someone in a therapeutic setting and trying to convey these practices to them, often there's a lot of resistance. How is it that we can meet that resistance and still encourage the practice?"

The person shared some examples of that resistance: "I've been this way my whole life. I won't be able to change." Or, "These are terrible people. I can't feel compassion for them."

And underneath it all, I believe, is a lack of self-compassion. And so in trying to work with someone in that way, you're helping them see that there's something underneath all of that.

So again, it's a really important question. I appreciate it. What you're talking about is a quite tender process, because if someone says, "I've been this way my whole life, I could never change," your first move, without even saying anything, is to hold that person in compassion and recognize: imagine living in a consciousness that doesn't believe they can be anything but unworthy or suffering.

And sometimes you can even say that out loud. You know, "Here I am, sitting with you, and you say this." And you repeat what you heard them say: "I'm just this way and I'll never change." And how hard it is even to hear this because of that amount of suffering. And so you start to actually model the compassion a little bit with them.

Then there are various other things you could do. You could say, "Well, maybe you can't change yourself, but if a child came up to you—an eight-year-old girl or seven-year-old girl—and said, 'I don't feel good about myself and I'll never change,' what would you say to them? Would you say, 'That's the end of it for your life'?" And so there are different gateways.

Or you could simply begin to say, "You know, it is really hard to hold this life in compassion. It's difficult and it's scary because we think if we did, who would we be?" You can voice some of the fears. Maybe we'd be overwhelmed. What you've done is you've found a good way to protect yourself. These are your strategies to keep yourself safe, and you want to be compassionate for that. Thank you for those strategies. And now, do you want to live just from that old way, or is there some possibility of change? Or you tell a story about change or something like that.

In a way, you find these different avenues, and any person who's been a therapist for a while has a variety of tools. But I think the biggest thing is to let them have compassion for the way they are, including the feeling that they can't change themselves. The child piece can work, or just your tenderness. I mean, I think that's really what most of therapy is about anyway—loving people, quite honestly. Yes, there are tools and ways to help them change, but a lot of it is just loving them in an ongoing and respectful and tender way. And after a while, you kind of wear them down with your relentless love.

But not in some weird way—it's respectful of them. And the more resistance, basically, the more that is the voice of how much suffering they've been through, what trauma they have, and so forth.

Yeah, thanks for that.

One more comment, question in the back.

"Hi. I'm actually from Sonoma and I'm currently evacuated, and I'm also a psychologist."

Oh my God, you've got two bad things happening for you.

"So I had signed up for this program a week or so ago, prior to being evacuated and all that. And I decided that I had nothing else to do today, so it was a good place to be. And I am just so incredibly grateful for your voice, for the soothing voice that you have in the meditations that we've done so far, and your awareness of the suffering that's going on just in our own community. And I decided to look at my phone on the break, which was a mistake, and another client texted me that she'd lost her home. So it's a lot to hold, just personally, professionally, and all of that. And so, again, I'm just really grateful to be here."

Thank you. I'm very glad you're here. I'm glad we have some clear air in this room for you to breathe coming down from Sonoma. And it is a lot to hold—first for your own home and your own life and people around.

And I also want to say, which I guess one gets to say in their seventies, that human beings are amazingly resilient. Even though we go through some eras of tremendous suffering—and this is a huge one, certainly in Napa and Sonoma—this is also going to draw out of the community care, love, resilience, strength. Through all this, it's going to be a struggle to do it. But I also see that we rebuild and that we know how to do it. And to be able to both hold the sufferings of people—the loss and the trauma—together with seeing that possibility of resilience is very, very important.

we look with the eyes that see the best of human beings and their possibilities.

So I'm really glad you're here, and invite your friends. We're here. We open ourselves to anyone who wants to come down and any way we can provide shelter and support. Thank you.

Let's continue a bit with two more dimensions before our lunch break. I want to talk about deepening the capacity for mindfulness in more detail. Again, the neuroscience shows that with training in mindfulness, like Sara Lazar's research at Harvard, there

actually start to become changes in structural integration in the brain as people train their attention in mindfulness. Things become more integrated between different brain parts. There's similar research at Stanford showing more integrative fibers and so forth.

One of the things Sara Lazar found was that there's cortical thickening from mindfulness practice. Normally, the cortex starts to thin as we age, as do lots of other things like our skin and so forth. But through attentional and mindfulness training, there's actually an increase, a thickening cortex. So you stay smart, we hope, anyway.

And all this comes through the capacity that grows in us to be present—an increasing capacity for presence, to acknowledge and give attention to what makes up our life.

The dimensions of mindfulness and the foundations of mindfulness start with mindfulness of the body. We began in that way by training our attention to the breath. Emory University shows that through attention to the body, there's more rapid healing, improved immune function. Again, I talked about telomeres and epigenetic changes that are measurable.

To put it in a very simple way: how do we touch and hold this mysterious body that we've been given? Because it's a mirror to consciousness, to our life. The body reflects the states of heart and mind, as we know. We can have an experience of a boulder of grief on our heart, or an empty hole of loneliness when our children have all left for college, or when we're going through divorce—contracted in different ways, the tensions we hold in our body that get built up.

Sir James McKenzie, who was the father of mind-body medicine in the 1890s, took a paper rose under a glass bell jar and pulled the glass off in front of an asthmatic patient who was severely allergic to roses. Even though this paper rose had no scent whatsoever, the minute he took it off—she not knowing it was paper—she went into a full-blown asthma attack. Because mind and body are connected. How we think and how we envision affects our body as much as anything else.

So how do we touch this? A lot of what happens on retreats here is that as people over some days get in touch with what's going on in their body, all the traumas and thoughts and ideas also reveal themselves. We get people who are in the middle of struggles in their business or their marriage. As they get quiet, they notice how much is carried in their body and how much they can learn from this.

But what do you do? Do you fight it? Do you hate this stuff? "Okay, I've found tension. I've got restriction and constriction in my body." There's a way we try to control the outer things, and we clench ourselves in fear and anger and all of those things. Part of our

invitation in mindfulness is to notice that the body is a mirror for the states of heart and mind. Not only do we attend to what's difficult and learn to allow those experiences, but also to allow and tune ourselves to moments of ease and well-being.

In neuropsychology, there's a negativity bias built into our nervous system—we're always looking for danger, and it's our survival instinct. You have to take care of danger or you're not going to be able to reproduce or take care of your family. So we're ten times more tuned to see what's wrong than to allow ourselves to experience well-being. Here in the training of mindful attention, not only in the body can we learn to hold the physical experiences of pain and throbbing, but we also can begin to allow the joy of life and tune ourselves to well-being.

A poem by Eduardo Galeano: "The church says the body is a sin. Science says the body is a machine. The marketplace says the body is a business. And the body says, I am a fiesta." You can hear in it all these different ways of holding this human incarnation, this human body. With mindfulness, we begin to allow both aliveness and the measure of pain and the measure of pleasure that come with having a human body.

When there's pain, you can hold it the way you would hold a crying child. You don't try to get the child over it or something like that. This baby's been fed and diapered. There's nothing they need and they're just crying. What do you do? You hold the child, rock the child. And after a while, you can feel the softening. "All right, I feel held."

It's safe enough.

And in a certain way, to begin to pay attention to the body, the difficult things can be held with this loving awareness. And then what starts to happen is it begins to unravel. There will be shaking and tremors and release, and sometimes it feels like it gets worse—energy movement and so forth. As you meditate, you can feel colder or hotter, all kinds of vibrations and things like that. And little by little, the body opens, because with attention, it wants to open.

It's the lack of attention that allows things to accumulate. You sit quietly and your shoulders are tight, your jaw hurts, your back hurts. And it's been the place for the last months or years where every time there was a little conflict, you tightened, and then it gets stored in there in different patterns. Then as you sit quietly, it begins to open, and sometimes it hurts more. It's not because you're doing it wrong. It's because you're becoming conscious of what was there that was held in your body.

And then the practice is to be interested and kind and to allow the body to show you what it's carrying, however it is.

One of the great practices—we don't have time to do this morning—is the kind of body scan. It's part of what Jon Kabat-Zinn teaches in mindfulness-based stress reduction. We teach it on retreats here. To be able to go systematically through the body—and it's not just a release, not just a relaxation, but actually a deep presence for each part of the body. Sometimes it's very painful to feel what's there. And you're not trying to get rid of it. But as you bring attention again and again, the body starts to open. That free flow of attention and inner energy then allows for a profound healing. Later on we'll talk about trauma, but those are all layered in the body. Trauma is there with stories and emotions.

I remember a woman who came on a retreat and she could not sit still. As soon as she sat, fear would arise or her body would start to shake. After a minute, she just couldn't do it. Of course, when somebody can't do something, or there's a lot of resistance—which was that question before—I get really interested. Oh, something's cooking. What's going on?

So I said, let's sit together. She came in and we sat and I said, all right, we'll just try sitting and you can describe to me what happens. Close your eyes, begin to sit. She said, okay, I get quiet. My body starts to shake. I feel a rising of fear. I've got to get out of here. I said, stick with it, just make loving awareness a space to hold all this. And then all of a sudden her eyes flew open and she said, "Ropes." And I said, tell me what you see.

It turned out that she had been abducted ten years before, kidnapped, tied up, all kinds of terrible things. And that was all still in there. The minute she sat still, it triggered that memory of being tied up and being unable to move. Meditation was unable to move, so all that stuff came up immediately.

We started to hold it with compassion, but it was not the right thing to just stay there. She told me some of the story, which I needed to hear and she needed to have witnessed. Some of the emotions came forward, and I said, why don't you do walking meditation? Don't try to sit.

And so she did. For those ten days of retreat, she didn't sit mostly. She just walked back and forth, being mindful of each step, noticing the emotions, seeing all the images that came. And little by little, she walked herself back into her body, because she actually couldn't live in her body after that trauma. She'd been doing all kinds of other things to avoid the trauma that she carried.

So the attention to the body becomes really important—the ability to help through these different practices of body scan or walking or just bringing a healing presence to the places that hurt. We did the compassion practice in the same way. Whether you use your hands or use the attention, you can go to the places that feel the most tight when they arise and hold them like a child.

Because usually we contract and there's a resistance. And when you contract and resist, what happens? It locks it in. But with that softening and kind attention, the body says, "Oh, finally she's paying attention to me. Finally he's paying attention to me." And things that have been held can open.

So that's the first foundation of mindfulness and training. We'll do a little more practice with it shortly.

The second foundation is feelings. There are both primary and secondary feelings. The primary feelings, which make up our human life, are that everything we experience has a pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant quality to it. You'll notice this when you look.

Since you were an amoeba, you started to move toward food positively and withdraw from whatever was toxic or dangerous. It's been built into your many incarnations—whether you believe it or not, your cells remember this—to like what's pleasant and dislike what's unpleasant. That's very natural.

But it doesn't serve us as higher mammals in the way that we are, because if that kind of automatic reaction happens all the time, then you are buffeted back and forth. As soon as something is pleasant, you like it and you grasp and want more. As soon as something is unpleasant, you resist it, you fear it, you try to push it away. Your life is always one of reaction to experience in a kind of primitive way.

With mindfulness or loving awareness, you begin to notice: "So this is pleasant" or "This is unpleasant"—and it doesn't scare you. Or "This is neutral, and I tend to space out." You actually develop the capacity to be present for your life without so much reactivity.

Then, based on the primary feelings, there arise the secondary set of feelings, which include all kinds of emotions. And they direct your life pretty much. You could say your life is directed by your thoughts, but William O. Douglas, Supreme Court Justice, said, "At the Supreme Court level where I work, 90% of our decisions are based on how we feel about things. And the other 10% is used to justify how we feel about it in legal terms." If it's true in the Supreme Court, you know it's true in your life, right? What you like, how you feel about things.

And so with mindfulness, what you can do is begin to bring a loving awareness, a kind attention to all the different feelings that come. Sadness or anxiety or loneliness or boredom or sleepiness or excitement or love or joy or a sense of ease or peace—all those that are more positive emotions.

I have a list that I made years ago. Now you can Google it and find lists of 500 feelings. It's very rich. Affectionate. Ambitious. Aggressive. Anguished. Ambivalent. Angry. Amused. Amorous. Aversive. Appreciative. Argumentative. Adamant. Addled. Amazed. Blissful. Brokenhearted. Bonkers. Bored. Bad. Belligerent. Bouncy. Buoyant. Bottled up. Brave. Cheerful. Calm. Claustrophobic. Curious. Crestfallen. It just goes on and on. We have a river of feelings that move through our consciousness. And usually we just notice them half a little bit, and then they direct our life.

So to become mindful, you start to notice the states that come in your own body and mind. As you do—and studies at UCLA show this—when you can name or acknowledge your feelings, it increases affect regulation. It increases your emotional balance. You become actually able to regulate all these feelings rather than being thrown around by your fear and your confusion and your longing and your love and your desire and your hate, one after another.

The way you do it is to acknowledge them, feel them in your body and heart and mind, and then often to name them. As the shamans say, when you know the name of the dragon, it starts to give you power over it. The minute you can say, "Oh, sadness feels like this," and "Anger feels like this," and "Fear feels like this," and "Longing feels like this," or "Love feels like this"—the minute you can actually name what you're experiencing, it starts to give you a kind of freedom.

And then to trust that you can tolerate your feelings. This will take some practice. I can remember a woman coming in with enormous rage, lots of abuse in her background. She said, "If I let myself feel this, I will just kill people."

I'll just be—the fire is so destructive. I said, well, let's see. Again, it's meditative, so you don't have to act it out exactly. Close your eyes, we'll do this together. Let yourself feel this sort of fire-burning rage. And I said, well, how big is it? Let's get a nature image. Is this like a hurricane or a tornado? She said, bigger. I said, well, you know, a tsunami? She said, no, no, this is nuclear.

I said, well, let yourself feel it. This was bottled up in this woman. You can imagine what her life was like. Nuclear. Huge. I said, how big is it? She said, if I let it go, it's going to obliterate everything. I said, well, let's see what happens.

So this huge nuclear fire and flame and hatred and rage. I let her feel it, imagine it, picture it. She was ready. She'd done some mindfulness training, so it wasn't like this was the first thing she did, but she was ready to try to explore this.

After a few minutes, she shook her head. She said, dead. Her eyes were still closed. I said, keep your eyes closed. What's dead? She said, everything. I just burned it all. The whole galaxy is all dead.

I said, all right, name that. Dead, dead. We're just acknowledging, naming each thing. It was rage, rage. Fire, fire. Burning, burning. Now dead, dead. Okay, dead, dead. She's naming it. Dead, dead. She said, it's dead. Nothing's going to happen.

I said, well, let's give it some time. Keep naming it dead. Let's give it a year, a hundred years, a century, maybe ten thousand years. How long is it going to take? She said, oh, a million years. I said, fine, we have time. So you're naming it dead. Let a million years pass—which was really a minute or two, right? Just everything's dead. See what happens. Dead, dead.

She shook her head. I said, what was that? Nothing. She said, okay, more dead. Give it another million years. Shook her head again. I said, what's that?

She said, "Well, over there's a little green." I said, "Well, do you want to check it out? There's a little planet over there and little green things are starting to come back" — you know, like the grass pushing itself up from the sidewalk. And life was coming back.

What you learn in working with feelings is that if you can allow them with loving awareness, you can trust that there's a fundamental healing that wants to take place, and that it can happen for people. As Pablo Neruda, the great poet, said, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's something about life itself that insists on renewing itself.

Let me tell you one story, and then we'll do a practice together. This comes from a New Yorker account of a small unit of American soldiers — twenty-four of them — who were walking down the streets of the holy city of Najaf in Iraq during the early years of the Iraqi war. Hundreds of Iraqis poured out of buildings on either side, fists waving, throats taut. They pressed in on the twenty-four Americans, who glanced at one another in terror. The journalist recording this said, "I was afraid somebody would open fire and there would just be a huge massacre."

At that moment, the American officer in charge, wearing sunglasses, turned to his men and said, "Take a knee." Against the background of this seething crowd that had now swelled to a thousand, he held his own rifle over his head with the barrel pointed

to the ground — a gesture that was almost biblical. The soldiers, who looked at him as if he were crazy, one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, knelt before the boiling crowd and, like their officer, pointed their guns to the ground. The Iraqis fell silent, their anger subsided, and the officer ordered his men to withdraw.

The journalist later tracked down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes and asked him where he had learned to tame a roiling crowd in a war zone like this. He assured the journalist that it wasn't part of the army manual of instruction. "The problem is that if you fire even warning shots, the next thing you know, people start firing at one another and everyone starts to die," he said. "I understood that the Iraqis felt that our presence there was disrespecting their holy mosque and their culture. And the obvious solution was a gesture of respect."

There's some way in working with feelings that each feeling is welcomed almost with a bow. You name it — sadness, grief, rage, fury, love, joy, longing, peace — and you actually acknowledge each one with a gesture of respect.

So here's what I want you to do. We'll practice for a little bit. We'll start again as we had with mindfulness of the breath. But then, when a strong body sensation arises — tension, tingling, coolness, throbbing — let go of the breath. When it's strong, turn your attention as if to bow to it and name it. "Oh, tingling. Throbbing. Tightness. Fire." Hold it with kindness and see what it does. It might get stronger or move in the body or change, but give it that loving attention. Then when you're at ease with it or it subsides, you go back to your breath for a while, letting things mostly be in the background.

After some time — maybe a minute or so — some other strong thing comes. Maybe it's an emotion. "I really feel sad about all that's lost, what's happening to my friends in Sonoma and Napa." Or "I feel upset about this." Or "I love this meditation. I want more. I'm going to come on a retreat. I'm excited." Then you name it gently — "excitement" or "sad, sad, excited" — and you feel it move through your body and mind.

The interesting thing is that feelings actually don't last that long. You're sitting there and maybe you get angry about something. "Okay, anger, anger. They did this to me. I'm really angry at her or him." Then after about fifteen seconds, you notice the anger has turned into resentment. "How could they do that? I resent them." Then you stay with it a little bit and you say, "I hate this. I hate feeling the anger. I hate that people act this way." And then a few seconds later you think,

But I shouldn't be a hateful person. This is terrible. And you notice it's turned into self-judgment. Judging, judging. But then they did hurt me. And all of a sudden you feel righteous about it. I need to stand up for myself. And then you feel the anger for a while. And you notice how sad you feel that people would treat you that way. And the anger turns into sadness.

And then about fifteen seconds later you think, I wonder what I should eat for lunch—because the mind has no pride. You can be in the middle of this great drama and it starts thinking, "But I saw that nice thing for sale in the bookstore. I'm going to go to the deli." And then, "I'm no good at this meditation," and you judge yourself. "I feel so frustrated, but I am naming it all." And then you start to feel, "Oh, this is pride. I'm doing well." You just start to see that the states come and go, one thing after another. You can name that and then go back to your breath for a while.

And you start to develop the capacity to be present for what is arising and passing. You become more like the sky of awareness, of loving awareness, that can allow these things without taking each one personally or without getting lost in it.

Does that all make sense to you? Okay, so let your eyes close gently. We'll take ten minutes or so to practice. And again, keep it quite simple.

As you sit, find a way to be both upright and present, but also gracious, some ease in your body. Come back to the training of loving awareness of your breath, of attention, as a way to stabilize awareness, to connect body and mind.

As you feel the breath, let the other experiences be in the background. Let them rise and fall like waves through the ocean around the breath. After a little while, even as you keep going back to the breath, periodically you'll notice a very strong wave arise that pulls your attention from the breath. It might be a strong sensation in the body—tightness, pain, throbbing, tingling, pleasant—or it might be a strong feeling: sadness, excitement, longing.

When a strong sensation or a strong feeling arises, let go of the attention to the breath and, as if to greet it with a bow, name it gently. "Oh, sad, sad, sad," or "pain in the body, pain," or "throbbing, tingling, tingling."

As you name it gently, hold it with this loving awareness and see what it does. It might open or expand or get more intense or change to another feeling for a bit. And you name that. After you are at ease with what's present, return back for a time to the breath.

This breath, or this moment's experience, received with loving awareness, named gently—you become the mindfulness itself. You are the loving awareness that notices breath, body, or feelings.

[Bell]

So for the few of you who haven't done this before, how was it to name your experience as you sat with it? Was that helpful? What did you notice?

One person said, "I have sort of a burning question, and my intention is that it will help clarify some confusion for me and hopefully for many people. I've really been pondering this idea about being goal-oriented. I came to mindfulness to heal my own trauma and to kind of rewire and transform the landscape of my mind. And with a lot of practice, I have gone from being more of a negative default mode, from having a lot of anxiety, to being able to sit with it. And I guess my question is, now that I believe in the power of thought, there are these two ideas that seem to be hitting each other: How much am I allowing and letting things move through? And then how much am I trying to cleanse my mind and become more self-loving? Because I don't want to just keep allowing the self-hatred."

Yes. This is a really great question, and part of it we'll answer as we go along because it is so important.

As you can feel, we're starting like George Schaller with the gorillas and so forth, just taking our seat and seeing the landscape. Because even the self-hatred, to use your word, in some way has built into it this kind of judgment: *I'm not okay and I have to fix myself.* There's somehow a belief in that.

So to establish the capacity to be present with loving awareness for all that landscape becomes critical as a ground. And then it's possible to direct and choose from that ground what thoughts or what direction you go. So listen as we go along because it's a beautiful question, and hopefully it will answer. And if not, remind me later in the day when you feel like it hasn't been. But I think it will.

And it leads perfectly into the next piece that I want to talk about. We've been working with mindfulness of the breath and body and then mindfulness of feelings. And does that work for you? You could notice the feelings and acknowledge them. Pretty much people are able to do that—name them and so forth—when you turn your attention to them.

Now the next foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of thoughts. And as the verses in Buddhist psychology begin, "Mind is the forerunner of things. Out of mind are created all the life." If you drive over the Golden Gate Bridge and see the city of San Francisco, every building you see and all the streets—they were thoughts in somebody's mind. So is the Golden Gate Bridge. All the human-made things, anyway, start as thoughts.

And then you sit quietly, you start to pay attention to your own breath, and you notice what's called the river of thoughts. The mind secretes thoughts the way the salivary gland secretes saliva. It just does. And it's not good or bad. It's just what it does—that inner dialogue.

The wild thing is that if the person next to you had a little speaker on the side of their head and you could hear their thoughts—the ideas and plans and judgments and reruns and things—you'd start to move away from them because they'd be really like, *oh my God.* They're wacky in there. But of course, we all have those kind of thoughts. And they're often reruns. I think 80% of the thoughts you have today are the same ones you had yesterday. It's like you're stuck in an old motel room late at night and the shopping channel's on and you can't change the channel. You're just getting all these old thoughts. And they're often one-sided or not true.

Story for you. When my daughter Cindy was in first grade, we took a trip to California to visit family. While we were there, she lost a tooth. She ran into the kitchen to show me and asked if the tooth fairy could fly that far, all the way from the East Coast. My mom shot a look of concern and later suggested that by indulging in such fantasies, I was teaching my child not to trust adults. Wasn't she going to feel betrayed when she found out the truth?

So the next time Cindy lost a tooth at home, she chattered with excitement as I put her to bed. She was now seven and a half. And she said, "How does the tooth fairy get in?"

"Through the window," I explained.

"Well, shouldn't we unlock it then?"

"Oh, I do that right before I go to bed," I said.

"Why does the tooth fairy want everybody's teeth?" she went on.

I took a deep breath, considered my mother's advice. Cindy would soon figure out the truth anyway, so I told my inquisitive seven-and-a-half-year-old that in fact I was the tooth fairy. She cried hard. I apologized and explained she was getting to an age at which it was more important for me to be honest with her than to play imaginary games. We cuddled for a while, and she stopped crying.

She had one last question: "What do you wear?"

This is how the mind works, you know. It just believes its stories.

And we just get lost in them.

So the thing that's kind of important is to be able to see the stories, to step back, if you will, with the witnessing quality of loving awareness and see what stories we're believing. Are they healthy stories or unhealthy stories? Which is a little bit like the question that was just asked. But the very first step is just to realize that with our attention, we can start to see the different thoughts that go through our mind—which lots of people don't really have that capacity. They haven't trained that.

So we're going to do a little practice now for thirty seconds or sixty seconds. You don't even have to change your posture much. What this practice is, is you're going to count your thoughts. Like the cat at the mouse hole. And they're tricky little guys because as you start to pay attention, they get quiet. And then they sneak up from behind and they'll say, "There haven't been many thoughts yet, have there?" Oh, three, right?

Now, the numbers are also a thought, but you don't want to count those. That's the cat chasing its tail. You don't want to do that. Or, "It's very quiet in here"—four. "There haven't been many thoughts"—five. Whatever. Sometimes it'll be picture thoughts. Sometimes it'll be word thoughts that describe things.

Now, understand that a thought, a picture, a word is not the same as a direct sense experience. So if you hear a sound or feel a sensation, that's just a sound or sensation. Then there comes a, "Gee, that's a sound. I wonder... Did I hear the bell from the other retreat?" And you have a little story about it. Or you hear that sound and you have an image of a bird or something. "I wonder what that is." So it's the words or pictures that describe experience, not the direct experience.

All right, you ready? Let your eyes close. On your mark. Get set. Count.

So, question for you—don't need the mic for this. How many thoughts did you count? Six? Ten? Five? Seven? Eleven? Nineteen? Two?

All right, so the person who had nineteen thoughts, did they have more thoughts than the person who had five? Or did the person who had five thoughts just have longer thoughts?

And then there's a group of you that had almost only picture thoughts, right? Some of you, I know that. And you probably know that of yourselves, that you think in images. Other people had just word thoughts without any pictures. And then some of you get the audio-visual portion together—you get kind of words and pictures combined.

So that's also interesting, that our minds operate in different ways. You can't always make an assumption about another person that you're talking to, that they even think in the same way that you do.

But the important thing is that you are able to step back and be that loving awareness that could notice the thoughts. And this gives you an enormous freedom, because your thoughts direct your life. Applying for which job, or who you should marry, or who you should divorce, or what kind of home you're going to design, or all these other things. Yet often we kind of live inside them and we can't take a step back. But here we're actually able to see the thoughts, and then in doing so, we can respond rather than react—which is really what your question was about.

You know, is this a healthy or useful set of thoughts, or not?

Hawaiian educator Puanani Burgess tells a story where she worked in school systems with a process called "building beloved community," like Martin Luther King's phrase. The exercise she uses is to have people tell three stories. The first is the story of your names. The second is the story of your community. And the third is the story of your gift.

One time she did this process in a local high school. They went around the circle and this young man, Kele, told the story of his names well, and the story of his community. But when it came time to tell the story of his gift, he said, "What, miss? What kind of gift do you think I have? I'm in this special ed class. I have a hard time reading. I can't do math. Why you make me so ashamed for to ask that kind of question? You think if I had a gift they'd put me in this class?" And he just shut down.

The teacher said she felt really ashamed because she'd never tried to shame anybody. A couple of weeks later, she was in the local grocery store and saw Kele down one of the aisles. She thought, I've shamed him in some way—I'll turn the other way. But before she could turn around, she heard him call out, "Auntie! Auntie!" He ran toward her and said, "I've been thinking, you know, what kind of gift I have, what my gift is."

She said, "Okay, brother, what kind of gift?"

And he said, "You know, I've been thinking. I can't do that math stuff, and reading's hard. But auntie, when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish. And the fish, he comes every time. Every time, even when we don't have money, I can put food on my family's table. And sometimes when I stay in the ocean and the shark comes, he looks at me and I look at him, and I tell him, 'Uncle, I'm not going to take plenty fish. I just take one, two fish, just for my family. All the rest I leave for you.' And so the shark says, 'Oh, you cool, brother.' And I tell the shark, 'Uncle, you cool.' And the shark goes his way and I go mine."

She looked at this boy, Kele, and she knew what a genius he was. But in our society, the way schools are run, he's rubbish. He's not appreciated at all. So when she talked to his teacher and the principal, she asked them: What would his life have been like if this curriculum were gift-based? If we were able to see the gift in each one of our children and taught them around their gifts, what would happen to our community, to the collective, if we could understand that each person carries gifts to this world?

This is a traditional African understanding as well. Malidoma Somé talked about it in his culture. I love his metaphor. He says we're all born with a certain cargo—like the West African cargo boats that go up the river. Everybody's born with a certain cargo, and your task in life is to deliver your cargo. That's what makes you happy and what brings you connection to the world.

So we have these stories about how someone should be or how we should be. "I'm in this class, I don't count, I don't matter." It's not until we can actually step back and see the stories that we tell that a deeper kind of freedom comes. It's like Mark Twain, who said, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." We have all those stories we tell about what's going to happen that aren't necessarily true.

Once you see this, then there are other teachings of thought replacement, where if you have thoughts of self-hatred or self-judgment or self-criticism or paranoia, you can replace them with thoughts or practices of loving-kindness or compassion. You start to train your attention to go toward that which is healthy. My teacher said it's like you're under a mango tree and you shake the tree, and the fruit falls down. Do you pick up the rotten mangoes or the good ones? You pick up the good mangoes. You start to be able to see the thought structure, and then you can see: these ones don't have my best interest in mind—let me let go of those. And these ones bring well-being, connectedness, health.

And it's interesting because I remember talking to a psychiatrist about all of this, a friend who had been doing meditation. He said he had a patient who was obsessive and paranoid and had some really pretty significant mental illness and mental problems. And he said, "I taught him loving kindness meditation." And because he was obsessive, he did it a lot, a lot, a lot. But it was a lot better than the other thoughts. And because he was paranoid, he used to get upset at the cars that went by late in the night and the dog and his neighbors that would bark. And now when that happened, he would say, "I don't think I'm doing enough loving kindness for the dog, you know, or the people in the neighborhood." And he would sort of up his loving kindness practice. And yes, in a certain way he was still caught, but it was an improvement considerably in his own mind, in his life.

So there are all these trainings, whether it's mindfulness-based cognitive therapy that works—and the research shows from Zindel Siegel and others that significant depression can be prevented through the ability to both see what you're thinking and then change the channel of the thoughts. Or Marsha Linehan's DBT, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, where she takes people who have pretty significant problems, borderline diagnosis and other things like that, and uses mindfulness training in a pretty effective way to help them change their lives. So again, just looking at Buddhist teachings as a psychology, these are some of the ways of applying it.

Now, there's one more step of deepening our understanding of how to apply these teachings this morning. And this is expressed or described in the acronym RAIN, which came from my friend and colleague Michelle McDonald. RAIN speaks of the way to deal with difficult problems, emotions, and conflicts that we carry in ourselves. And the acronym stands for Recognize, Accept, Investigate, and Not identify or not take it personally.

We'll go through those now. And as we do—even before we do it—you can think of a particular problem that you have in your life to which you could apply these practices of RAIN, of recognizing. Just in case you're a person that has problems, you can kind of bring that to mind. All right?

So, recognition. The research of Cliff Saron at UC Davis and also of Norman Farb shows that as you train in loving awareness or mindful attention, it actually enhances clarity of perception. You can see more clearly. You see what's happening. You can describe it clearly. You understand it more clearly. This is recognition.

And one beautiful Zen phrase for this is that to become mindful is to become intimate with the world. Mindfulness is a kind of intimacy—an intimacy that notices what's actually happening and what that is like.

And I remember, very early on, decades ago, before I was married, I was in a relationship. And it was quite a bit of struggle. I was probably in my late twenties or early thirties. And I went to see a friend of mine who was a good therapist. And I was talking about, you know, he said, she said, what was going on and so forth. And he just listened for a while. And he looked at me and he said, "You're really angry, aren't you?"

And I thought, "Moi? Mr. Buddhist, former monk, really angry?" It wasn't the story I was telling. I was frustrated and cheated and so forth. But the minute he said it, it crystallized in me. I said, "Oh yeah, actually I am angry." And there are ways we don't even know what we're feeling. Someone else can be outside of us and say this.

Or I think of another colleague who's a very skilled and wonderful meditation teacher, but in her relationship some years ago, this guy had betrayed her, jilted her, and dumped her basically. And she was trying to be compassionate and kind and so forth. And I was talking with her—obviously a lot of pain—and I said, "Have you considered revenge?" And this huge smile came across her lips, because you knew she had. Right? And just naming it. I mean, she wasn't going to do it. But just to be able to acknowledge: this is what is going on. This is how it feels. Betrayal feels like this. Hurt feels like this.

Longing feels like this. Loneliness feels like this. What are the stories? The grief, or whatever it might be. We have all these stories inside. So this is how we're holding it. And acceptance is just to see it clearly. Recognition is simply to acknowledge what's happening.

There's a cartoon from Jules Feiffer that shows a man sitting there a little disconsolately. The first panel says, "I inherited my father's way of thinking and analyzing the world." The second panel says, "I inherited my father's emotions and all the feelings, how he would approach things." The third one: "I inherited my father's style of moving and dressing and walking through the world." And then the last panel says, "And I inherited my mother's contempt for my father." So there you have a little therapeutic story in four panels.

The first step is just to recognize, with loving awareness, this is the way that it is. Grief feels like this. Longing feels like this. Fear feels like this. And to understand that these experiences are human.

That leads to the next step, which is whatever problem you're looking at as we go through these now—you've got to accept it, recognize this is the way that it is, and then accept it. The acceptance doesn't mean that at some point you're not going to respond to it. But until we can recognize that there are still twenty-eight thousand nuclear war-

heads around the world, to recognize it and accept that that's true, we can't go any further in how we're going to eliminate them or hopefully not use them. The first step is to say, this is where we are. Recognition, and then acceptance.

When people sit and meditate, my teacher called it stopping the war. You're always at war with the way it's supposed to be—what's too big or too small or too late or too early, your conflict with the world. Take your seat and stop your war with the world and just be present for the way that it is.

So you sit and you get sleepy. And instead of judging it, you acknowledge, "Oh, this is sleepiness." Maybe your body's tired. You've been running around a lot and you get quiet, and tiredness taps you on the shoulder and says, "Remember me? I'm tired."

Or maybe you're restless. And you sit there and you pay attention to restlessness and you name it: restlessness. And it gets worse. "I can't stand it. I've got to get up." So restless. "I hate this." Hating, hating. Restless, restless. And then what to do with it? You name it. Restless, restless. And if it doesn't go away and it gets worse and worse, then there's something else you can do. You can say, "Okay, take me. I will be the first person to die of restlessness at Spirit Rock this year. Kill me. Do me in."

And the minute you say, "All right, dying, dying—restless, I'm going to die of restlessness"—the minute you do that, it loses its power over you because you're not resisting it. And most of the difficulty is actually your resistance to the experience.

So this is the next step. Tara Brach uses the language, "I consent." This is where we start. Arthritis in my body that's growing worse. The loss of a parent.

The troubles outside us.

Here's a Zen master's poem, by Issa:

Dew evaporates and all this world is dew, like the dew on the tip of a leaf. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.

A little like a haiku. Now I want you to listen one more time, because he wrote this at the death of his six-year-old daughter.

Dew evaporates and all this world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.

And this is his acceptance. This is what was the most beautiful, refreshing, delicious experience, and now gone—as will everything be gone at some point.

There's a book that I really admire, and I admire the man who wrote it: Father Greg Boyle's *Tattoos on the Heart*. If you want to read a really remarkable account, if you haven't read it already—Father Greg Boyle started Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles and works with gang kids, doing really remarkable work.

One of the stories—there are many in the book that are quite moving and extraordinary—is that he went one morning to do a service. He's also the priest for several of the Catholic churches in the barrios of East Los Angeles and elsewhere. And he went to this church one morning and sprayed across the front of the church in graffiti were the big words: "Wetback Church," because it had been a place that harbored immigrants who had just come over the border.

He was horrified by this. It was a slanderous thing to do, a hateful thing to do. And he went in and there were the people waiting for the service. And he said, "You know, one of the things our gang kids can do—we have a contract from the city for Homeboy Industries—is they clean up graffiti. I'll get them over here right away. This is a terrible thing. It was hateful." He was trying to tend to them and hold this, saying he was sorry about it.

And then this one woman, Rosa Saldana, stood up on her chair—she never usually spoke—and waved her hands and said, "You will not remove that."

He said, "I beg your pardon?"

And she said, "If there are people who are cast out, judged, despised, or rejected because they are *mojados*, wetbacks, then we shall be proud to call ourselves the Wetback Church."

And there was something in her expression that says, "No, we will not reject this. We will stand up proudly and say we are the place that provides sanctuary, and leave that on there."

This is a literal expression of what it means to accept the way things are—to see them, to recognize them and say, "This is the circumstance we find ourselves in." And when you think about your difficulty, recognizing and accepting it as the way it is becomes the foundation.

Then the next step is to investigate, to look deeply. When you look deeply: How do you hold it in the body? How do you touch it? Is it tight or loose or painful? How big is it? Is it the hurricane or the typhoon or nuclear? What are the emotions that come with this difficulty? What are the stories that it tells?

Here's a poem from an eight-year-old boy:

I want to tell the fish, eat only the bait, not the hook. When you eat the bait, start from its edge and slowly gnaw bit by bit. Never, ever gobble it in one go.

He's really trying to express something he's learned—that you can approach things, even things that are difficult, but you have to look carefully. You have to investigate. You have to see how this is.

So when things are difficult, you recognize, you accept them, and then you look deeply. And then you start to hear the stories: "I'm unlovable. I could never be loved."

One of the most meaningful things in working with clients who bring that story up, at the right moment, is to have them give voice to that—after some compassion and other work—and then look in their eyes and say, "Is that true?"

Without any judgment, just say, "That again. Tell me, is that really true? Do you know that to be absolutely true—that you're unlovable?"

When you gaze in someone's eyes and ask what's true, it's very hard for them to lie in quite the same way. They're going to hesitate. "Well, it sort of feels that way."

"Is it really, really true?"

And it can change somebody's life to see themselves in a very different way because of it.

So there are all these different stories. "I'm unlovable." Or when you investigate anger, I notice—and I've learned this—if I express that anger directly, "I'm angry at you for doing this," it goes one direction. But usually underneath anger is what?

Hurt? Fear? Some kind of pain? Or some feeling of being disrespected? And if I approach that situation or that person and say, "I feel hurt," or "I feel afraid," they become interested. But if I say, "I'm so angry at you," they're not as interested in that. They back away.

So investigation means to look at what are the stories it tells, what are the mind states with it, what are the emotions that are deeper under it, and you start to see the construction of that difficulty in your heart and mind. And it leads to the possibility of release.

Here's from Sandra, a woman that I worked with on a retreat who had a history of binge eating for much of her life. And eating disorders are very, very painful and very hard. She described years of struggling with the compulsion of wandering like a hungry ghost, full of self-hatred:

"I believed that food had the unparalleled capacity to bring satisfaction and to free me from suffering. Time and again, I reach for the food, looking for it to do its magic, only to have it turn on me, fail me, bring me untold physical and emotional suffering and shame. I became hypercritical of myself and my situation and despaired.

"Freedom has come as I've become more mindful of my body and the intense discomfort I was trying to escape from. I started to find that I could recover more quickly and less painfully from bouts of compulsive binging if I could stay even a little bit kind to my body and present with my pain and the stories I was telling. Instead of eating even more, just to try and avoid the effects of having eaten too much and the remorse of having done it again, I could actually watch myself start down that sad old path. And as the loving awareness grew, I realized, oh, I don't have to do this. And self-compassion could grow. I'm deeply grateful for the compassion that has rescued me from the realm of the hungry ghosts."

And so you hear her process in working through the suffering and the pain of her life. Investigating—are these stories true, in the deepest way? Where do we hold it in the body? How are we touching it? All the discovery that comes. Recognize, accept, investigate. See the causes, the history.

And then the last is to not identify. It's the shift of identity. I mean, who are you really?

My friend Ram Dass was teaching after he came back from being in India in his early years, calling himself Baba Ram Dass. He had beads and a beard and was teaching Hindu mantras and kind of like a guru. And one woman sitting in the front raised her hand at one point and said, "Hey Ram Dass, you're teaching this Hindu stuff. Aren't you Jewish? Come on."

And he said, "Yes, as I am." He was bar mitzvahed. He went through all of this as I did. And then he said, "You know, I love the Jewish tradition. The Hasidic masters are a lot like the great Zen masters, if you read all those stories. And the Kabbalah is all this mystical teaching that's very much like the mystical teachings of India." He said, "It's beautiful stuff." And he paused. "But remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side."

Which was a very witty comment, as he was, but also something quite true—that who you are is not limited by your parents or your conditioning, or for that matter, by your race or by your culture. Those are all a part of you in some way, and they need to be respected or honored, but that's not who you really are. You can take that as your identity, but you're also free to release it.

And it's not just your pain then when you feel the pain that you have. It's the pain of human incarnation. It goes from being my pain to the pain of the world. And you carry part of that.

In meditation, there's something called the tears of the way, the tears of the Dharma—not because you feel impoverished or someone mistreated you or insulted you, but because your heart starts to open and you realize we all carry a certain measure of pain and a certain measure of beauty. And this is human life.

And so you recognize and accept, and you look deeply, and you realize you don't have to take it so personally. And it starts to liberate you in this profound way.

It's like Ajahn Chah. We were out on alms round one morning, walking with our bowls to a village to receive morning food. And he saw there was a big boulder in the field nearby, like Spirit Rock. He said to us, "Is that boulder heavy?" And we said, "Yes, master." He smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

He was really pointing to how we take things so personally and then identify with them and believe that that's who we are.

I have this cartoon of two generals striding down the halls of the Pentagon with all their medals, and one is looking at the other and saying, "It really shook me, I can tell you. I dreamed the meek inherited the earth."

We have all these identities of our roles and who we think we are. They're useful. They need to be honored. But they're really tentative. Who we are—and we'll explore this more as we go on in the afternoon—is not our body or our feelings or our conditioning. You are the spirit that was born into your body from the very beginning and that will leave your body when you die. Your consciousness itself. We'll talk more about that.

But all of a sudden you begin to realize in this way that it's possible not to be so caught up even in your own problems. Not to take them quite so personally. Not to speak of the global problems.

Gary Snyder, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Zen master, now in his eighties, was interviewed by a colleague here, Wes Nisker, a few years ago. Wes said, "Gary, you've been one of the great environmentalists of the last fifty years. Almost fifty years ago, you published *Earth Household* and all of these teachings about bioregionalism and our concern for the environment. Now you see global warming, climate change, rising oceans, loss of species. What message do you have for us?"

Gary sat back and said, "Don't feel guilty." He said, "If you feel guilty, you're just going to add to the suffering. That's part of what made it. Do you think that guilt is going to help us? It's just going to create more conflict." He said, "If you want to save it, don't save it out of guilt or out of duty. Save it because you love it."

And that's really the only power, the only force that's going to change the world: love. Love that knows that it's not just those animals or those trees or that environment. It's our life.

The air that you're breathing today is also the air of the fires of Napa and Mendocino and Sonoma. It's also the air that dusted Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came to us over the Pacific, being interbreathed with the badgers that live on this land and the deer and the turkey vultures and the turkeys. But it also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor before it came into your lungs, didn't it? Some of it.

This is us. This is our body. And if you save it, you don't say, "Oh, my poor foot. Maybe I should help it. Should I? Is it worthy? I'm busy doing other things." If it hurts, it's a part of you and you tend it. You are part of life itself.

To not identify allows you to shift from taking things personally and to see that we're part of the dance, the tainted glory of humanity in some way. When we don't take it personally, there are both the tears of the way for all who struggle and the unbearable beauty and the love that comes, the tenderness that comes when you feel yourself connected with life.

Then your problems become more manageable because they are not layered with your self-judgment and your self-pity and your struggles. "Okay, I accept. I recognize, I accept them. I see that they come in part from this conditioning or these circumstances. Underneath are these feelings." And it's possible to address them and hold them in an entirely different way.

Does this make sense to you?

So this is kind of a practical application in Buddhist psychology of these very things we've been working with—mindfulness and compassion and loving awareness in difficulties.

I want to share one more story before we break for lunch. This is from Fran Peavey, who was a worldwide anti-nuclear activist, among many things, and a poet.

She writes: "One day I was walking through the Stanford University campus with a friend when I saw a crowd of people with cameras and video equipment on a little hillside. They were clustered around a pair of chimpanzees—a male running loose and a female on a light chain about twenty feet long. It turned out the male was from one of those amusement park zoos, and the female was being studied for something at Stanford. And who I thought were spectators were actually the scientists and publicity people trying to get them to mate.

"The male was eager. You know how they can be. He grunted and grabbed the female's chain and tugged. She whimpered and backed away, not into it. He pulled again. She pulled back. Watching the chimps' faces, I began to feel sympathy for the female.

"Suddenly the female chimp yanked her chain out of the male's grasp, and to my amazement, she walked through the crowd straight over to me and took my hand. Then she led me across the circle to the only other two women in the crowd, and she joined hands with them, and the four of us stood in a circle. I remember the feeling of that rough palm against mine. The little chimp had recognized us and reached out across all the years of evolution to form her own women's support group."

We are connected, you know. This is really true.

I was listening to Jane Goodall yesterday on Science Friday, and it was so moving to hear her—both the description of her work and also the kind of love she has, not just for the chimps but for the wildness of the world and what it means for us to tend our own wildness in our own world. And this story really speaks of that deep and loving connection.

That connection grows from mindfulness. It grows from loving awareness. It grows from the compassion and loving kindness training we've been working with, and from our capacity to be more and more fully present so that we can be with a person with their measure of pain and their incredible beauty—and not drown in their pain, but actually be able to tolerate it with them so that they can find a way to tolerate it. And to see the beauty behind all of that and say, "This is who you are. This is really what's possible for you."

So this has been a lot of teachings and little bits of meditation and training, kind of opening one part of the treasure chest of Buddhist psychology and Buddhist teachings. I hope you find it to be useful, maybe inspiring—things to reflect on and carry.

[This section contains multilingual chanting and song—a beautiful weaving of voices in English, Spanish, and French, all expressing the same universal prayer]

The mercy flows through every language, every voice lifted together:

The wind in the trees, the light on the hills—they are full of mercy.

I only want to hold the world in my embrace, to shelter the world within me.

At the end of the day, there is always the heart that remains. At the end of the day, there is so much wealth—the courage and the kindness I see in all these souls, the love and beauty that brings me back to this calm.

The ancient mantra rises:

Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāha

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond—awakening!

And the metta prayer, spoken in every tongue, returns again and again like waves to shore:

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be safe.

May all beings be free.

These are the ancient teachings of loving-kindness.

Even as a mother protects with her life her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings. Radiating kindness over the entire world—upward to the skies and downward to the depths—may all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, the great and the mighty, seen and unseen, male and female, young and old, the beings of the earth and the air and the waters, living near and far away—may all beings be at ease. May they all be happy.

May I too be filled with loving-kindness. May I be filled with mercy and tender compassion. May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and joyful.

You can search the whole tenfold universe and not find a single being more worthy of love than the one listening to these words right now—yourself.

May all beings be held in mercy and tender compassion. May all beings be happy and live with ease. And may all beings, far and near, young and old, may all beings be free.

Let the great heart of loving-kindness in you blossom to hold all beings everywhere.

Know this truth: hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. This is the great heart of loving-kindness, the sublime abiding.

CHAPTER 77

Liberation and Mindfulness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · 1h02

> *In this opening retreat talk at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield illuminates the essential practice of mindfulness—what he also calls loving awareness—as the pathway to liberation taught in the Buddhist tradition. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna teachings and the Ādittapariyāya Sutta (the Fire Sermon), he contrasts the saṃsāric way of unconscious reactivity with the freedom that comes through present-moment awareness.*
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> *Kornfield presents three progressive levels of mindfulness practice. The first involves learning to be present with the content of experience—body sensations, feelings, and thoughts—expanding what neuroscience calls our "window of tolerance." The second level reveals the process of experience itself: seeing that all phenomena are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and selfless (anattā). The third and most liberating level is resting in consciousness itself, becoming "the one who knows," as his teacher Ajahn Chah taught. This shift of identity from the changing phenomena to awareness itself brings the deepest freedom.*
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> *Through stories of hospice workers, his teacher Mahā Ghosānanda's peace walks through Cambodia, and personal encounters with mystery, Kornfield shows how this practice cultivates both ease and fearlessness. He emphasizes that liberation is available here and now—not requiring years of practice or distant retreats—and that as we mature in loving awareness, we naturally bring these qualities of wisdom and compassion to a world that desperately needs them. The talk weaves together the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) with practical guidance for working with body, feelings, mind states, and the recognition of our true nature.*

Ringing the bell before a talk makes it sound momentous, but actually I just like ringing the bell. We got it on the opening day of this retreat hall. We were thinking we needed a bell and then magically Zen Center sent us—San Francisco Zen Center sent us a gift and said, "We think you need a bell." And we did. So thank you, Zen Center.

You've completed one day of the retreat practice. A few of you are on your first retreat, and many of you have done quite a few retreats. Still, it is a process of settling down.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the core of our practice together. I'd like to talk about mindfulness, or what I will also be using as a synonym: loving awareness. If you read in the Buddhist texts, they begin in the most wonderful way: there is a path for living beings to realize well-being and liberation and overcome sorrow and grief and lamentation and despair. I think Spring talked about that. And it's the practice of mindfulness. In other texts, it says mindfulness is all-helpful, that mindfulness is the gateway to liberation and freedom. And so I want us to think together—those of you who've been practicing for a long time and those who are newer—about what this means and what it means for us. How does this operate?

There are two ways to function in the world. One is without mindfulness. This is sometimes called samsaric, or cyclic—the cyclic way of living. Because without mindfulness, without some sense of awareness, when experiences arise, what arises with them is habit, reactivity. We get fearful, we get caught, we're blind. We like it, we don't like it. Without mindfulness, we live in a somewhat unconscious set of patterns that simply enact the conditioning around us—the cultural conditioning, the educational conditioning, and so forth.

As we do, not only is there not much sense of awareness and freedom, but unfortunately, these patterns build. Because they're based in delusion, in fear, in a sense that we can't trust the world, that we have to protect ourselves. It's called the body of fear. And it grows.

Just coming back from teaching with Trudy in China, being in Asia, talking to people in Singapore and Korea—as those societies have modernized, there's a tremendous amount of stress. There's all the great prosperity that's happened, but there's also extremely high suicide rates among children in Korea and Singapore and parts of China, who are being driven to be ambitious and fulfill the goals of their parents or of the society. And then there's the grief that comes and the struggle. All of this is a kind of samsaric way of being, where things continue to operate but there's not a sense of inner freedom, of mindfulness, of being able to step back and really listen in a wise way.

If you read what is called the Fire Sermon, one of the first major talks of the Buddha, he begins: "This world is burning. This world is on fire"—which is something I think you can taste in the air here. So it's not just metaphorical. But then he goes on: In what way is this world burning? It's burning with the fires of greed. It's burning with the fires of hatred and ignorance. It's burning with the fires of delusion. And these fires cause immense suffering. We can see those forces as they operate in the world and, to a

certain extent, in our own lives—when we're caught in greed and grasping and hatred and fear and ignorance and confusion. That's the samsaric nature, the repetitive nature of unconsciousness.

After his enlightenment, as the myth tells it, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of compassion, all four quarters of the world, and saw that there were beings suffering everywhere in different ways from delusion and greed and fear. And he saw that it would be possible to teach them a way that brought inner peace, liberation, wakefulness, ease, a sense of trust, graciousness. The way that he taught was to offer what we're doing here: the training and practice of mindfulness.

Now, whether you're a long-term practitioner or whether you're somewhat new, you don't have to wait for more years to find freedom, and you don't have to go on a long retreat in Thailand or Burma or go to the Himalayas. Freedom and well-being is available exactly where you are. I mean, where else would it be? This very body and this very mind is the place of liberation. It's the place we can get entangled and lost and habitual and repetitive and reactive and fearful. And it's also the place where trust, graciousness, wakefulness, and compassion can be born. As we find these, or as we mature into them over the years of practice, we also bring these qualities to the world that so much needs them.

You're all familiar with the passage from Thich Nhat Hanh where he says: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive. And so as you train and practice in this great art of mindfulness and loving awareness, you become that person on the boat of the world that so much needs it.

The invitation, however many years of practice that you have done, has two sides to it. One side, which Spring spoke about this morning, is an invitation to ease.

This is from Zen Master Ryokan, the most beloved poet in Japanese history. He writes: "If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Praise and blame, wealth and honor are nothing but dust. As the evening falls, I sit in my hermitage and stretch out both feet as an answer."

And so there he is in his mountain hermitage. Praise and blame, gain and loss, wealth and honor—what is the mark of enlightenment? I stretch out my feet in answer. There's something so gracious and lovely about this. He's not in conflict with the world.

So one of the invitations for your practice is to find ease in your heart, in your body, in your mind. And the other, which is a complement to that, is the invitation of fearlessness. Fearlessness doesn't mean you won't have fear. Anybody in this room not have fear? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. It doesn't work that way.

Fearlessness is something else. It is the steadiness, the courage, and the discipline to be present for this world with graciousness and ease on one side, but also with your full being. This is the invitation of practice—both ease and a kind of fearlessness that grows as we sit and walk.

When you think about where we're going on the spiritual path, the goal is not so much to get somewhere, but rather to open to the mystery of life. As it's said, the mystery of life is not a problem to solve, but a reality to experience.

I think about sitting with one of the teachers from Spirit Rock, Marlene Jones. A couple of years ago, she had heart failure. Unfortunately, where she was in the circumstances, it took a long time for the paramedics to get to her—fifteen or twenty minutes. So she had no oxygen to her brain for a long time. They got her to the hospital and iced her down, put her in a coma, and brought her back out. For a week they tried everything they could to get any response from her. Nothing. They did all kinds of tests. Brain dead, zero.

Sitting with her family, together we decided it was time to take her off all the life support machines. I was holding her hand and looking at her, saying, "Marlene, you know, you've been so important and such a great colleague. You're dying too soon. I'm going to miss you—and so many things you could have done with us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." Sort of teasing her a little bit, trying to make people who were sitting with her—her daughter and so forth—smile a little as well.

And as soon as I said that, two tears rolled down her cheeks. A week of nothing. The doctors prodding her, the different electrical brain monitoring and so forth—nothing. "The least you could do is give us a sign," and the tears came.

Who are we? Who are you? What is that spirit that was born into your body and that will also leave your body when you die? I could tell lots more stories, but you get the idea—we actually live in mystery. To be a human being is the most remarkable, mysterious thing you can imagine.

I was at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering a couple of years ago. I don't think that will be happening again soon—I'm going to leave that aside. I was able to give one of the key talks there, which was on the Buddhist teachings of wise society: treating all members of society with respect, coming together in harmony and leaving

in harmony. You know the things we've seen so recently. Taking care of the vulnerable—the young, the elderly, those who are sick, the women. This is a way, said the Buddha, that a society prospers and does not decline. And care for the environment. There's a whole text about wise society.

But it's also not all that different from what you'd find in the great spiritual traditions around the world—from the Native Americans, or from the wisest teachings in Jewish and Christian traditions, in Native traditions in Africa, and all kinds of places like that.

But the difference, and what made this conference so compelling, was that while these are beautiful visions of wise society, there's actually a way to do it. With the five thousand neuroscience studies and papers in the last few decades on mindfulness and compassion, it's now, as you know, in school systems—tens of thousands of them—in clinics, being employed in business, in arts, and so forth. I have a big packet that was sent to me called "Mindful Nation," signed by the eighty-five members of the British Parliament Mindfulness Group.

We can only hope that it's transmitted across the pond to our side sometime soon.

With mindfulness comes an invitation to freedom here and now, where we are. It's the only place we can find it. And this freedom manifests at three different levels—call it mindfulness or loving awareness.

The first level of freedom is our ability to know and be present for the content of experience. So we're sitting with our breath and our body, and we encounter tension and pain, pleasure and ease, tingling, heat, fire. We learn how to sit with it. We can name it gently: this is tingling, this is tension. These are the different experiences we have. As we sit and the body starts to open, we become aware of the content of our body experience—all the sensations and feelings that make up our embodied life.

What grows with this practice is what neuroscience calls the window of tolerance. We live in a society that is pretty much terrified of pain. We live in a culture of comfort. Too cold, turn up the heat. Too hot, turn on the air conditioning. Do whatever you can to make yourself comfortable. If you're uncomfortable, the problem is out there.

But here's the thing: is there anybody in the room who doesn't have discomfort or pain in their life, in spite of all those attempts to keep it at bay? You don't have to bother raising your hand. This is the way it is—praise and blame, pleasure and pain. We have it. And so if we can actually be with the content of our experience, we start to find a freedom already. Freedom with pain, freedom with tingling and tension and hot and cold. Instead of being reactive, mindfulness allows us to be present for that experience.

And of course it can get more extreme. Trudy and I had dinner in Hawaii, visiting some friends, and this world-famous magician named David Blaine was there, doing card tricks that I couldn't imagine how he performed. He said he loved doing them especially in front of scientists. He showed us videos—he'd done them with Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates, and they were going crazy, asking, "How could you do that? What's the physics of this?" I just said, "This is really good magic." But anyway, he was also talking about how he pushes his body. He's the guy who hung in a glass box over the Thames River for forty-three days, only drinking liquids without eating. He's an extreme kind of guy.

I told him about living in a monastery where our training was to master the postures by sitting for twenty-four hours without moving, or standing for twenty-four hours without moving. He said, "Oh yeah, I once did twelve days standing without moving." I said, okay, you got it. But it felt like there was some kind of brotherhood with him.

What happens when we learn to be mindful is that we can actually tolerate this world rather than be frightened of it. And it's not just a personal freedom that comes. As James Baldwin writes, "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

When we can't bear our pain or our fear or our insecurity, we project it out on others—on the communists, or on Black people, or Asian people, or Native people, or Muslims, or immigrants. It was Russia for a while. I think Russia is coming back as enemy du jour; it's going to have a recurrence now. But we project it out because we live in a way that we can't bear the reality of insecurity. And yet, insecurity is the truth of the world.

So we learn more and more what it's like to be present for our body. And in the same way, we learn how to be present for our feelings—the tears and joy and grief and all the things that will come up on retreat.

Here's a story from Frank Ostaseski, who started Zen Hospice, a good friend I've been teaching with recently. He writes about Jillian, a woman who worked in publishing. When her mother got Alzheimer's, she decided to bring her mother to live with her and hired a caregiver. She came home one day, walked into the living room, and found all her beloved books—including her favorite Buddhist texts—scattered across the floor. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty books. I'm going to give them to my dentist." You can almost hear the mind state.

And she became immediately angry, trapped and caught up, and started to scold the caregiver. "How could you let this happen? How could you let her do this?"

And the caregiver, who wasn't caught in that drama, replied, "Madam, today I pack the books up. Tomorrow I will unpack them. If this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well then, that's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

And you can feel the graciousness of heart and the ability to be with uncertainty and change that's in that story. This is why we call it loving awareness. We start to learn a graciousness with the body experience, with the feelings that we have, with the mind states that come. Because we'll have all kinds of views come here. You're doing well, your mind tells you. You're not doing well. The world is a mess, but it's so beautiful. And everything in between, because mind has no pride and it just keeps spitting out stories and plans and wise things and fearful ones and beliefs and so forth.

When I was eight or nine years old, probably around nine, we lived in Buffalo, New York—lots of snow. There was this huge snowstorm with icy winds. My twin brother and I, and my other brother a year younger, decided to go out and play, and we got all wrapped up. The wind was blowing wildly. My twin brother was a lot bigger than I—he played football and I was not a football player, we'll just say that. Much more robust. I was really skinny then, and I was shaking and shivering. It was freezing cold and I'm shaking out there.

He looked at me and said, "It's not cold."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He took off his hat, unwrapped his scarf. "It's not cold." The wind is blowing, freezing. He took off his jacket. Pretty soon he stripped himself down to the waist and started dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold. You just think it's cold."

I remember this for my whole life. There was something about him, even as a young boy, knowing that mind states determine how we live in this world. And I didn't have to be caught in, "Oh, it's terrifying and it's cold and I'm frightened and I'm shivering and I have to go inside."

So as we become aware of the content of experience and can see the stories we tell and the beliefs, we go, "Oh, that's a belief. That's a story. How interesting." But we don't have to get caught in it.

Now the next level of mindfulness is mindfulness of the process. You who've been practicing for some time over these months and years—as you quiet your mind and open your heart, the sense of freedom of being able to be with experience begins to shift, because you start to look at the process of body and mind and senses in the world. And what you see is that it's all impermanent. It's all arising and changing and passing away and selfless in the sense that you don't choose your thoughts. I hope not. Anyway, most of them in there you wouldn't choose. You don't choose your feelings very much. You certainly don't choose your body sensations. And you see that it's ephemeral, insecure, subject to change, subject to pain. This is the way it is. Everything you pay attention to arises for a time and vanishes. All of it.

In the time you listen to this one sentence, fifty thousand cells will have been born in your body and fifty thousand will have died. That's a billion in a day. Your body's always dying and being reborn and remaking itself, as is your whole idea of yourself.

As you start to see the process of experience, then a different kind of freedom comes, because you realize it's all changing and you don't want to hold on to it. Otherwise you get rope burn.

I remember walking with Ajahn Chah one day out on an alms round, and there was a big boulder in the field nearby.

And he said to us, "Is that boulder heavy?" And of course we said to the master, yes, it is. And he said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

That was a kind of pith teaching of seeing the process of life and realizing that we can tend to it. We can respond, we can care for our family, our community, and the world, but we don't have to grasp it—because it's ungraspable. And there grows an ease with birth and death, with joy and sorrow.

So the second level of freedom comes when we start to see the nature of things and we get easy with it.

Frank Ostaseski tells a story about a woman who died at Zen Hospice, and one of her sons was twelve years old with Down syndrome. They were afraid to bring him—Tommy—because they didn't know how he would understand his mother's death. But Frank said, "Let's try it out." The father said, "Well, maybe we should talk to his therapist." And Frank said, "Bring the therapist along. We'll work it out."

So Tommy went in to see his mother and stood there for a bit. Everybody was frightened that he'd freak out. But he looked at her and said, "What is gone?" Just kind of in wonder—"What is gone?" He looked at his mother for a while, and Frank asked,

"What do you think, Tommy?" He started to talk about the Transformers movies, where one thing would transform to another. She died—maybe she'll turn into something else. Very wise.

Frank said he stood there with him, realizing Tommy was trying to understand in his own way. And then Tommy did a kind of remarkable thing. Frank asked, "Is there anything else you want to say to your mother, or do with your mother?" Tommy went over and first touched her very gently on her cheek. And then he began to smell her. He sniffed her whole body, from head all the way down to her feet.

Frank said he remembered one time driving in New England. A car ahead of him had hit a deer, killed it. And there was a fawn with its mother—the deer that had died lying on the side of the road. The fawn was coming and sniffing its mother, trying to understand what happened. He said he stood there with Tommy, and it was so tender and so mysterious to watch him just be there and smell his mother. And then Tommy said, "Yes, okay." And he walked out.

This is us. We're in this mystery of birth and death. To know the process of things gives a profound sense of freedom—that it is natural to be born, natural to die, natural to have birth and death, joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss. And there grows a graciousness and an understanding.

The third level of mindfulness is the mindfulness of consciousness itself. Content, process, consciousness.

My teacher Ajahn Chah had practiced as a monk in the forest for about ten years, very ardently. In those days the forest had tigers, and everybody got malaria pretty much. He did all these austere practices and lots of deep meditation, had visions and profound insights and so forth. He finally went to see the greatest master of that time, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun. He told him all about his practices and asked, "Do you have any guidance for me?"

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Yes, Chah, you've missed the point." He said, "Those are just experiences. Dissolve your body into light, have a great vision, have some deep insight, overcome pain and pleasure—those are like movies. You get a war movie and a documentary and a romantic comedy, a love story. They all come and go. The only question for you to ask, for your freedom, is: to whom do these happen?"

So turn your attention from the content or even the process of the experience back to the knowing, and become the one who knows.

This invites a shift of identity. "You live in illusion, in the appearance of things," says Kalu Rinpoche, a great old Tibetan lama. "There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you remember, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So there's something for you to reflect on for the next nine days.

What it's pointing to is this—let me see if I can say it much more simply, because this is really a key to liberation. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? We all have that experience. Losing its fur and sagging and doing the things that aging does—wrinkling and all those things. But the strange thing, and it's very common, is that you don't necessarily feel older. You know how common that experience is? And that's because it's only your body that has aged. Your body exists in time. It grows—a little child, then an older child, a teen, a young adult, and it goes on. Then it gets older and it dies.

But the awareness that's looking at that body in the mirror doesn't exist in time. And it says, "Oh, well, how are we doing at this stage of life? Hmm, lost some more fur," or whatever your commentary on it is. "I wonder how much longer this one will last." Because you get it from Avis and then you have to turn it back in, right? It's just how it works.

So you start to look into the mystery of who you are, and you turn your attention back to become the awareness itself—to look into who you are and to become the knowing, the one who knows. And you know this already in yourselves. You know this in your being.

Alice Walker writes, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it came to me—that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house." When it happens, you just can't miss it.

Walking in the high mountains, listening to a piece of sacred music, making love, sitting there with someone who's dying, or being there at the birth of a new human being—it's a really wild thing. Here's another person coming out of someone's body. It's wild. And you go, "Okay, all right, I don't really have the kind of intellectual answer, but I'm present for this mystery of life itself coming out of nothing."

And you start to become the witness. You start to trust that you can rest in awareness itself. And this level of mindfulness gives you, as Ajahn Mun said, the greatest freedom of all—the freedom to sit with birth and to sit with death.

When you have this freedom, I think of my good friend and colleague and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, nominated for the Nobel Prize many times. I've told these stories so often, but he went back after the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rouge and spent fifteen years leading people back to their villages on foot, saying, "You can't go in a bus or a car. You have to reclaim your land step by step with chants of loving-kindness." *Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed.* Walking through the jungles and the killing fields, ringing a bell and chanting all the way back. He was somebody who had had this very deep training. And he knew —all nineteen members of his family had been killed. Yet there was a way in which he knew how to return to the world.

Because the end of this process—this mindfulness moving from content to process to consciousness itself—doesn't end in some kind of spaced-out realm. Rather, when you enter and discover that who you are is nothing, and being nothing you are everything, as Kalu Rinpoche said, then the world is your family. Then you return and enter the world with a wiser heart and a freer spirit, no matter what happens.

Now, as you continue to practice on this retreat, you will sense these levels as you go through the foundations of mindfulness. As your body opens up more—and Christiane is going to talk more about this tomorrow evening—you can learn how to be present for your body not by striving but, as Spring talked about, with a graciousness or an ease. You let your body settle. Or if you can't, if you can't be with your breath, you can pay attention to your hands or to the sounds around you. But you keep gently coming back, steadying your attention.

And as you do, of course, at the content level, you become able to be aware of the different pains and tensions and the things that are carried in your body. But at the same time, you also will start to find moments of ease and pleasure. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment. Peace and equanimity are other factors of enlightenment.

For those who are experienced practitioners, one of the best instructions you can have is to look for the moments of ease and the moments of joy and the moments of presence, and invite them to expand. Let the sense of well-being that starts to come periodically as you sit or walk—invite it to open, dwell in it, rest in it. You start to shift the figure and ground from the struggle with the body, even though sometimes you have to sit with things that are quite difficult and painful. Instead, you also invite a sense of ease and peace and well-being. This shift becomes really helpful.

Then as your mind gets quieter and you shift from content to process, the experiences of the body and the senses begin to break up and pixelate. Every sensation that's tight in the body, or the sounds you hear, becomes like many little vibrations. Whatever seems solid starts more and more to become visible to your mindfulness or your loving awareness as a kind of vibrating energy field that's full of life and not solid at all.

Trudy and I were at a conference together with Elissa Epel. She works with Liz Blackburn at UC Medical Center here—Liz got the Nobel Prize for discovering telomeres. Part of their research, which completely shocked them, was that after eight weeks of meditation practice, the telomeres, which are the caps on the end of chromosomes that protect them and keep them longer alive, actually grew and extended. They couldn't believe it. They replicated it a few times. They were afraid to publish it because people would think they were kind of kooky. But it has been replicated.

That wasn't what she talked about, though. We kind of knew that. She talked about some new research. Part of it—and I really want to read this study to figure out how they did it—is that they studied the telomeres in a community that had a big disparity between rich and poor. Those who were poor, as you would expect, had frayed telomeres. The stress and the poverty and the racism and all the kinds of suffering affects the body very deeply. But the thing that was interesting is that those who were wealthy in that community, even if they were in a gated community, their telomeres also had diminished. It's as if the cells of your body are tuned in to the environment. You are not separate from your environment. It's really wild.

So as you get deeper and quieter, you start to see the body as an energy field. Yes, you can be with the content, but you see the process of life itself.

And then there comes the mysterious thing that happens where you both love the body and tend it and care for it because it's really precious, and yet—I think of this quadriplegic who came to some Dharma teachings. I can still hear his voice at one point where he said, "I've discovered I am not the body." He'd been unable to move for a number of years. He said, "I've discovered I am not this body. Hallelujah!" He shouted it out. And so there's both the care for the body, but in this paradoxical way, there's also an understanding that you rent it, you use it, you love it, you care for it, but it's not who you really are.

In the same way, these levels work with feelings. You notice the content of your feelings. As C.S. Lewis wrote, you will discover inside "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds"—and every other feeling in between. I have a list of five hundred different feelings. So you start to see the content of the feelings, and you're able to be present for them and to name them, acknowledge:

this is sadness, sad, sad. This is excitement, excitement, excitement. By naming the experiences, like naming the dragon, there comes a kind of freedom in relationship to them.

But then, as that goes on, there comes a kind of maturing, because people often don't even know what they're feeling. I have a friend named Arturo Bejar who was the vice president of Facebook for a while. His job, among other things—he was an engineer—was to be in charge of problem solving for Facebook. He said, "So I was also the complaints department. And because we have 980 million users, it didn't take very long to get a million complaints." Talk about a complaints department! He said about a third of them were engineering problems. "I gave them to the engineers and they fixed them. That's what engineers do, mostly, if they're good. But two-thirds of them were the problems between people."

You posted a picture of me that I don't like—I don't look good in it. You posted a picture of my children, how dare you! You said that about me. It was conflict between people.

At first, he sent the boilerplate policy: if it's lewd or lascivious or hateful or whatever, then we'll take it down—this is our policy. Nobody was happy. So then he realized they had to do something about these complaints. He thought maybe it would be good if people contacted each other. So he started sending out a message: Why don't you talk to the person that upset you? Or message them, whatever.

But then he realized people weren't very skillful at that. So he said, why don't you tell them what upset you and how you felt about it? Well, after a little while, he found that people didn't know what they felt. So he sent out those little emoticons—angry, sad, whatever. You can show them how you felt about it. And then he said, why don't you get curious and ask them why they posted it? And the people who answered would say, "Well, I thought you looked good in that picture," or "I love your children. I thought it was a great thing. I'm so sorry."

It turned out that in ninety-five percent of the cases where people actually talked to each other, the conflict was resolved. As Arturo said, "I get to teach social and emotional learning and conflict resolution skills to 980 million people."

But this is something we're learning in a much deeper way in ourselves—to recognize what we're feeling. Often that means recognizing the trauma, the deep hurts carried in our body, the stories that come with it, the emotions. Being willing and able to be present for it all, the whole content of it.

And then something very interesting happens. Because you feel both the suffering you've been through and the beauty of your life, you kind of open yourself to that. You become able to bear your measure of tears and your measure of sorrows. As the heart becomes more tender, as you've practiced—and many of you have for a long time—you actually become more sensitive. But you also become more courageous and wiser. You're able to tolerate both the tears and the joy of the world, to bear witness to them, to hold them.

Then you get something called the tears of the way, which are tears that are poignant. You feel the sufferings of the world and you see its unbearable beauty, and you let your heart be touched by them all.

The fact that we don't know this in our culture... As someone said, I'd like to take every mother by the hand and walk them next to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and have them read aloud the names of everyone who was lost before anybody votes for war. Do not send a man to war who does not know how to weep.

When we talk about in our body politic the kind of conflicts that are happening and have happened—if that person isn't weeping, they're not paying attention.

So we become more sensitive, but we also increase our capacity for love, for presence. As we do, we start to see the river of feelings that make up human life—fear and longing and love and grief and loss and delight, the feelings of connection and creativity. We can bow and name them: fear is like this, longing is like this, love is like this, sadness is like this, connection is like this. We start to inhabit or feel that this is the nature of human incarnation. We see the process of life itself rather than taking it so personally.

Then we look at the mind, the third foundation of mindfulness, and the thoughts. This becomes really important as those of you who've practiced for a long time have matured, because we're really talking about how we live and embody this, not just on retreat.

The Buddhist texts say: Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you worse than your own mind untrained. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than a trained and tame mind—not even the most loving parents or loving members of your family.

So you start to see the stories and the attitudes. You get the content of it, the whole inner dialogue that you build your sense of self and world out of. It's sometimes rather alarming for those who come on their first retreat. It's like you're stuck in Motel 6 late

at night and the shopping channel's on and you can't turn it off. You start to realize that ninety-five percent of what's in there is reruns—the same bad show as yesterday, or good show, or whatever.

They keep repeating themselves. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. It just does. But you also begin to notice the attitudes that you glom onto or that you get attached to. This is right and this is wrong and so forth. You start to see those different thoughts and attitudes. And then, because you've been practicing for a while, you get to do what my beloved Trudy has taught me about, which she calls an attitude adjustment—where you see, okay, this is an attitude, but it actually doesn't have my best interest in mind. And you begin to realize that you can shift from one particular view or attitude to another.

So you start to know the content and the stories, and you don't believe them so much. You don't take them so seriously. The stories of unworthiness or the stories of grandiosity, the stories of success or failure—you know what your mind does, all of those kinds of things. And there comes a shift of identity where you're not so much identified with your thoughts. This becomes more the process.

There's that wonderful story I'd like to tell of Ram Dass coming back from India with his beard and beads and so forth as Baba Ram Dass, teaching, and the woman in the front row waving her hand and saying, "Ram Dass, you're teaching all these Hindu things, Hindu guru, but aren't you Jewish?" And Ram Dass said, "Yeah, I am actually. I was bar mitzvahed." And Ram Dass says, "There's a lot I love about Judaism. The Hasidic masters are like the Zen masters. If you read Buber's Tales of the Hasidim, they're fantastic. And the Kabbalah has all these maps of the levels of consciousness that are a great match to all the great Hindu teachings I like." He said, "But remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." And he was, of course, very witty as well as deep.

Because your identity is not your parents. And it's not even your gender or your race or your class. Those are things to honor and pay attention to, and without honoring them, we can have a lot of suffering. But that's not fundamentally who you are. And as you become quieter, you start to see, oh, that's only the personality when you look at the thoughts in the mind. Like your pet—okay, you've got it. Unfortunately, you've got a mutt in some cases, one of those adopted from the shelter. But you start to realize that the thought structures and the beliefs and the things you've been told about yourself—not only can you adjust your attitude, but you can also step back from them and see that those are just thoughts coming and going. They're like bubbles in a stream and they don't last.

And it doesn't take that much. Here's a letter I got:

"Dear Jack, I really don't know how to talk to you directly, but I wanted to express how grateful I am just to be aware of your teachings. I found out about you through Duncan Trussell's podcast last year"—who's a kind of dharma comedian with a big following among millennials, and I did some things with him—"and little by little, your ideas of loving yourself and having compassion kept inching their way toward what I guess is my heart. You soothed me in darker days and given me a glimpse into a more loving reality for myself. Tonight, I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided after hearing you speak through my phone for months and months, I'd finally give in and just sit with myself for a while. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the 21 years I've lived so far. For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I latched onto, my anxiety, my hatred, and everything else I criticized myself about, with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I finally got some relief with what I felt inside and want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you so much."

It doesn't take that long. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. Maybe you have to come to Spirit Rock, but that's another story.

And so you start to see these layers of mindfulness that acknowledges the content, that sees the process, and then steps back. And the shift of identity, as Thomas Merton says—Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic—"There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from unseen roots of all creation, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with humility and humanity." And he's talking about his meditation, that all these things come unbidden, the joys and sorrows, but underneath, as we shift our identity and become the one who knows, there comes a spaciousness and a freedom and a beauty.

And that's the fourth foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of the Dharma, of the laws that are operating. For example, the law of cause and effect.

That if you practice anger, guess what becomes more your habit? Anger. And not only that, if you plant seeds of anger by getting angry at lots of other people, guess what you will get back? Anger. If you plant seeds of love and practice love in yourself, that's what will grow. And you plant it in the world, that's what will return. If you plant greed in yourself, that's what will grow in you. And so you start to see this is actually very impersonal. This is simply how consciousness works.

And then you begin to see the emptiness of it, as it says in the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. Things arise—thoughts, feelings, experiences, whole

years. I mean, what happened to 2016? It's back there with Y2K. Remember that one in the year 2000? And also back there with the Great Depression and the Egyptian empires and dynasties—all in the past, it went back to emptiness. There's this, and then it disappears.

And as you get quiet, you start to see: whoa, wait a second, it seems very solid, but all there is, is now. All there is, is this present. And as you become more and more able to rest in the awareness of this, you become the one who knows. There's a shift in reality for you—the experiences of the world still arise, but there's a sense of spaciousness, openness, graciousness, and of deep love.

As my teacher Nisargadatta in Bombay, the old guru, said: "Wisdom sees that I am nothing and love sees that I am everything, and between these two my life flows." Because as you get more empty, and if you look to see who am I—am I the little awareness inside here, like that's yourself—you look and you can't find anything except it's aware. There's no self, nothing separate. And you start to realize that awareness is what the world is made of, consciousness itself. All things born out of consciousness.

And from this place, you realize that it's your family then. This is who you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. Love says, I'm everything. Between these two, my life flows. Mother Teresa puts it one way. She says the trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small. Life is your family. You come out of life. You are life. And you are what life is born from.

I think of Sharon Salzberg, our dear friend and colleague, who was walking down the street one day in Seattle when a somewhat toothless homeless man came up to her and said, "Don't you know me? Don't you know me?" And first she had to stop because we've had a lot of students on retreats—and I was at my 1978 three-month retreat, or whatever it could have been. But it turned out it wasn't somebody she literally knew. But she said the moment was so affecting to her when he said, "Don't you know me?" Because he's one of us. He is one of us. He's one of our family members.

And as you get emptier, or as you learn to rest as awareness itself, you discover that this is what's real. This and love. Because in the end, the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love. To be able to open the heart and mind and realize that, as the texts say: Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. Everything is waiting for you.

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I feel so grateful to have had the years of practice and training where I've learned some of these things I speak about in myself. Sometimes I don't really know how people can get through great difficulties without having some inner practices. It's so much harder. And I also feel grateful that we have a community together to remind one another. It's welcoming, and it's revolutionary—remembering who you really are.

There's a freedom and an invitation here. The beautiful thing that the Buddha says when he speaks about freedom is this: "If it were not possible to free the heart and mind amidst all the changing circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible—and possible for you—I offer these teachings."

You are sitting at the bedside of the world, the world of birth and death and joy and sorrow, and you're learning how to do it beautifully.

CHAPTER 78

Adhiṭṭhāna: The Power of Dedication and Resolve

Jack Kornfield · 1h58

> *In this Monday night talk at Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield illuminates adhiṭṭhāna (determination, dedication, resolve) as one of the essential qualities inherent to awakened consciousness. Drawing from his years as a monk in the forests of Thailand and Burma, Kornfield weaves together teachings on how dedication differs from attachment—while grasping creates suffering, steadfast commitment to love and awakening transforms everything.*
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> *Kornfield addresses the paradox of non-attachment and dedication, explaining that true commitment arises not from expectation but from recognizing our nature as loving awareness itself. He shares stories ranging from Jane Goodall's patient dedication with chimpanzees to Gandhi's trust in the ultimate triumph of truth and love, illustrating how determination operates across all dimensions of life. The talk explores both short-term intention—pausing to ask "what is my highest intention?" in difficult moments—and long-term intention, as expressed in the bodhisattva vows.*
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> *Particularly poignant given the recent Northern California fires, Kornfield speaks to how adversity reveals the indestructible spirit within us. He reminds listeners that they carry generations of survivors in their DNA and that it's never too late to awaken. The teaching emphasizes that spiritual life requires both the in-breath of meditation and remembrance, and the out-breath of offering our gifts to the world—setting the compass of the heart toward what truly matters.*

Good evening to you all. Just take a breath and let the stillness come into the room.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here for this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock Center. The Monday night sitting group is now in its thirty-third year, and I did it every week for about thirty years—now about once a month. It's been a great honor and a pleasure to do so.

If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley through the care and commitment of a whole community of people dedicated to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, that are central to the Buddhist teachings but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. We have all kinds of programs—retreats and classes and ways to develop compassion, loving-kindness, an inner sense of freedom and well-being for all kinds of

groups. And now that you've come here, those who've come for the first time, you can also let this be a place, should you wish to continue, that will serve you in whatever way you'd like.

So it's a pleasure to welcome you.

What we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We sit for thirty-five minutes or so with a little bit of meditation instruction as a reminder, or for those who are new. Then we take a break for ten or fifteen minutes to stretch or relax. After that, there's often a teaching, and on occasion, dialogue or questions and answers.

So let's begin with meditation.

Let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable and stable. If you're in a chair, you might let your feet be flat on the floor and sit upright with some sense of dignity. If you're on a cushion or bench, find any posture that allows your body to rest on the earth with stability and ease.

Once you've taken a stable posture, if you're comfortable doing so, let your eyes close gently for this time. Begin simply by noticing the state of your body, coming into the present here and now with your attention. If you like, you can take one or two deeper breaths to release tension. Notice as you scan through the body if there are areas of tightness or holding that are easy to release, and do so.

Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. You can roll your head in a circle if you wish to release your neck, and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body, the heaviness of gravity, and how the chair, the cushion, the floor completely support you—how you can let go and rest on the earth. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the play of experience just now. Sensations and feelings, sounds and thoughts, the energy of life. You become the witness of it with loving awareness, with mindfulness, noticing this moment of aliveness.

After just a minute or two, you notice how easily the attention wanders off to thinking and planning and remembering other places. So to deepen the sense of presence and connect body and mind, become aware of how the body is breathing itself. You sit with a graciousness, like the king or queen on the throne, and feel the breath as cool-

ness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to feel the breath, you can put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall on the palm of your hand.

As you feel each breath gently with loving awareness, you start to feel the rhythm of life that's always present here and now.

Again, after just a minute or two, you notice that the attention is pulled by the waves that rise and fall around the breath. As you feel each breath and return to it, there will be thoughts and sounds, sensations, feelings. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

When one of the waves becomes strong and pulls your attention from the breath, instead of struggling against it, let go of the awareness of breath and receive this stronger experience as if with a bow. With mindfulness or loving awareness, acknowledge it by name: "Oh, sadness," or "tingling," or "planning," or "excitement." As you name it gently —excitement, or remembering—feel the wave move through your body and mind. And when it's passed, or you're at ease with it, return back to the breath.

Rest just here in the reality of the present, aware of the body breathing itself, or acknowledging with loving awareness the waves of experience when they're strong, as they arise and pass away. This breath, this moment's experience—receive it with loving awareness. All things arise and pass in the space of loving awareness. This breath, this moment's experience, just now.

Welcome back. Let yourself quiet down a little bit. It was all that Halloween candy that made you so wild, I can tell.

I also want to say hello to the people who are on livestream tonight who decided to stay in their pajamas and watch from their living room, and to people who are upstairs in the overflow room as well, who are longing to be with you, but they get to stretch out and relax, so it's kind of a good deal.

Please let yourself sit comfortably and at ease and listen tonight. Listening to teachings is a meditation in itself—not because you're supposed to believe anything, and there's no exam at the end, although there is a lovely poem I've read that begins, "In the evening you will be examined on love." So there's a real exam for us.

Instead, you listen to see if what is spoken has any resonance in your heart to what you already know, to what you know to be true. And the rest of it can just let go by.

In the course of this year, over these twelve months, I've been doing a series of teachings on Buddha nature and on the awakened heart and the awakened mind.

Tonight is a particular quality where we're kind of getting through the list. You know, the Buddha was a list maker—the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Five Skandhas, the Six Paramitas, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and so forth. We've talked in previous months about qualities which are really inherent to the heart—generosity and integrity, wisdom and patience, renunciation. Next month it will be loving-kindness. That will be a juicy one before Christmas and the holidays.

Tonight it's a different quality, and I think an important one given that we live, at least some of us, in hard times—outwardly and inwardly. This is the quality called in Sanskrit *adhiṭṭhāna*, which means determination, dedication, commitment, resolve. It is one of the qualities that come out of our loving awareness. It is inherent to the heart when we discover who we really are.

I mean, who are we? How did you get born into this body and mind? It is really mysterious. And then how do we live wisely given the fact that we find ourselves in the human incarnation?

I'm also aware that this is the night before Halloween. One of my favorite memories from Monday nights, when we had our temporary buildings for twenty-five years in the meadow over there—those modular trailers for those of you who were here—was a Halloween night in the 1990s when we had a guest visit from the monks of one of the monasteries, Ganden or Shartse, the Gyuto Tantric Choir—the monks who chant with that whole chord of multivocal tones. I can't really quite do it. Anyway, they came in and they were going to chant for us, and the abbot put his forehead against mine. I guess it was some beautiful transmission or something like that. It was cool. Actually, it was fun.

So they were going to chant for us, which was lovely, and then I noted to them that it was Halloween and the moon was almost full. I talked a little bit about Halloween to these lamas, you know, and the costumes that people wear. They said, "Oh, we have costumes." They were in a van and they pulled out all these skeleton costumes. We went out into the meadow over there under the moonlight, and they did the skeleton dance of the dead on Halloween. I said, "Okay, whoever's central casting, this is perfect. Thank you."

Buddhist teaching is full of ghost stories. When I lived in the monasteries in the forests of Thailand and places in Burma, there's not only lots of stories of ghosts, but a really palpable fear of ghosts. It's part of everybody's daily experience in some way or other—to be wary of, to try to propitiate, to make sure the ghosts are happy.

Of course, being a young and rude Westerner at the monastery, I said, "Ghosts? Who believes in ghosts?" And I went and sat out in the charnel ground all night and said, "Okay, come on, bring it on, ghosts, whatever." I didn't see anything. They used to tease me about it. They said they saw my white skin and ran away, or something like that. Or maybe it was my big nose and they ran away.

But there were so many stories. My teacher's teacher was this very famous monk in Laos who used to go around, as Milarepa did, into areas where people were frightened by spirits. There are all these stories of him going into caves and being confronted by huge demons. He looked at the demon and said, "You think you're powerful? You don't even know who you are." And the demon says, "Huh?" He said, "Yeah, your power is really crude. You don't have any power over karma or dharma or anything important. It's just crude power. Do you want to know something?" The demon got interested, and he said, "All right, I'll teach you. I'll teach you how to meditate." So there are all those kinds of stories.

But I'll tell you a more modern ghost story, just because they're true. A good friend of mine who was a monk for a time in Burma became the director of one of the largest hospices in America.

He worked with Ram Dass for a long time as well. And one day, a family came to see him in the morning and said, "Our father is close to dying." Their dad was in his mid-eighties. "But we have a dilemma. His younger brother, who was seventy-nine, was killed in a car accident yesterday, and we don't know whether to tell him. He's very close to dying and it would upset him. What should we do?"

So my hospice director friend said, "Well, let's go and see how your dad's doing." They walk into the room and he's lying there, his last day or two, very weak. "Hi Dad." They pay attention to him and so forth. And then he raises his head and says, "Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "My brother died." They were shocked. "How do you know?" He said, "Oh, I've been talking to him all night long."

So who are we? Really, who are you? What do you think you're made of? Do you think you're this body made of whatever it is—hamburgers or kale or whatever your diet is? I mean, come on. There's something much more mysterious about life than we ordinarily touch.

I have this beautiful passage from Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, written years ago, where she says: "The secret of seeing, the pearl of great price—I would stagger barefoot across hundreds of deserts after any lunatic at all if he could help me to find it. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. It always comes as a revelation, a gift, a surprise." And she says that then you see what was ordinarily before your eyes, pulsing with light. It's filled with light. She says it's possible in deep space to sail on light, the light of the solar wind. Particle or wave, it has a force. You rig a giant sail and you go. And the secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind, hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, wedded, translucent, broadside to the merest puff, illuminated by the light.

We do live in this mystery, and things are glowing with life. Actually, anything that you look at doesn't quite exist that way. Your brain really creates it. The eyeball is always moving—it's not like a camera that just gets an image. It's actually always fluctuating. And then the colors that go on the retina and travel up through the optic nerve to that part of the brain—the brain really constructs what you see. So what is it to be alive, and who are we in this mystery?

If we take that as a kind of deep spiritual question, then this quality of adhiṭṭhāna, dedication or determination, becomes a question: To what are we dedicated?

If you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it starts with security, food, clothing, and shelter, then social needs, and at the top is spiritual needs. But it often can be reversed. When you look at Viktor Frankl coming out of the concentration camps, he said, "We who lived through the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts, comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they showed the greatest and truest reality of human spirit of all—the possibility to choose your spirit, no matter what the circumstance."

You see it in his life. You see it in the life of people like Nelson Mandela and others who, in spite of not having security or food or whatever, lived from and for the spirit. That's what they were dedicated to.

And so we begin to reflect in our own way in spiritual life: What are we dedicated to? What are our own values? Of course, there's a kind of conundrum, because a lot of spiritual teachings talk about non-attachment, which is a very good thing. Being at-

tached and grasping doesn't make people happy. You may have noticed that when you get attached to your children being a certain way, for example—they don't necessarily want to be the way you want them to be. They want to be themselves. The same with your partners. You may have noticed that as well.

So how does dedication and determination, resolve and commitment, work with non-attachment?

The game, you see, is somehow to remember your true nature, to remember that you are consciousness, that you are loving awareness. But as my dear friend Ram Dass likes to put it, "Remember your Buddha nature and your social security number." There are actually multiple dimensions to our experience. If you only remember your social security number, you're in trouble—plus it was stolen last week anyway, so you're in more trouble. But if you also only think, "Oh yes, it's all light and holy," and don't drive on the right side of the street, you'll be in trouble too.

Here's a story from Robert Johnson, the Jungian analyst and author of *He*, *She*, *We*—all these wonderful little mythological books. He said:

"Years ago when I was in rural India, before it got modernized, I was quite sick with a high fever and great pain. They took me to a hospital, and the man at the hospital must have seen my apprehension because he tried to assure me that they were a very modern facility. 'We have a thermometer,' the nurse reassured me. I later found that they had one thermometer that they passed from patient to patient. In between, they held it under the water faucet. My temperature reached 105. I had terrible diarrhea and cramps. Somehow, after ten days, I survived. The bill was twenty-eight dollars.

"While I was hospitalized, my new friend from the village where I had come to live, Shankar, came every evening to visit me and slept every night on the floor under my bed. Of all my experiences in India over the next twenty years, this was perhaps the most touching. When I was sick, my friend slept near me so that I wouldn't be frightened or lonely, or to see if I needed anything. Now in America, if I get sick, I can't get anyone to stay with me for very long, not to speak of sleeping under my bed.

"But Shankar came and not only slept on the mat but tended me. Then one day he stood at the foot of the bed and said, 'Robert, I want to tell you a story about Baba and his friend. This friend got very sick, and Baba came and stood behind him and said, "Only say the word and I will go to die so you can live." Robert, for you, I am Baba. You only have to say the word and I will die in our friendship so that you can be better.'

"It was like one of those stories out of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights. At first I was shocked by this. How can you hold that kind of an offer? But I had the presence of mind to say, 'Thank you, Shankar, for this great gift. Please don't do anything rash now. I think I have enough vitality left in me that both of us can continue to live.' And I did. But I never forgot the depth of the tie and the profundity of the relationship implied by this generosity I had never seen or known before."

And so here we are—these translucent beings made of consciousness, but also tending one another in this human form. If it's not attachment, then what is it? It's dedication. It's love. It's connection.

I talk about this when I've done weddings for people. If you're attached to the way a person is supposed to be, you will eventually get in conflict. "I need you to be this way, and you need to do this for me"—it doesn't run very well as a relationship. But if instead you are committed—committed to love, to care, to bless, to offer and foster your support to one another, not with expectations but with a steadiness of heart—it changes everything. When people love us with a steadiness, when we love with a steadiness, it changes everything.

Tori Murden, the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean, said, "If you know what it means to be out in the middle of an ocean by yourself in the dark, scared, then it gives you a feel for what every other human being is going through. I rowed an actual ocean. Other people have just as many obstacles to go through."

So dedication. What does it mean as human beings to be dedicated? And to what do we become dedicated? Dedication is really an expression of the awakened heart that says this life I experience, this embodied life, has certain things that I value, that really matter. Rather than saying, "I should be this way," it becomes, "This is what I care about." And of course, you learn this quality and find it supported by your training in meditation.

Zen master Suzuki Roshi writes: "Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease. You don't know what to do. You can't lie in bed. Normally the most comfortable place for you would be a warm, comfortable bed. You pace up and down, in and out, but this doesn't help. Actually, the best way to relieve your mental suffering is to sit in meditation, even in such a confused state of mind. If you have no experience of sitting in this kind of difficult situation, you're not yet a true meditation student."

No other activity will appease your suffering. In a continuous practice under a succession of agreeable and disagreeable situations, you will realize the marrow of meditation and acquire its true strength.

And so it's not that one practices in order to have a particular experience, but rather to learn this capacity to be present for the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows that make up human life.

Just last night I saw the film *Jane* at the Raphael Theater, about Jane Goodall. If you haven't seen it, it's really quite marvelous. They found a hundred hours of film that was shot in the 1960s by her husband, who was a brilliant and celebrated filmmaker—footage they thought had been lost for a long time—and used this to make a film. So you see a lot of her going there to Gombe and beginning to try to watch what chimps were doing. No one had ever done it in the wild before, at least not Europeans, not white folks. I'm sure that there were African people who lived there who knew the lives of chimpanzees much better, but no scientists, no researchers prior.

And the thing that you see in it is how long it took her to make a relationship with the chimps. There were no dating apps, you know—she couldn't swipe on it or anything. She had to trapse through the rain and sit under the bushes. And they would run away each time. And she would just sit there. And she did it again and again and again for months and months and months. She was asked, "Didn't you get frustrated?" She said, "I did. But Dr. Louis Leakey, who hired her, found that she had a considerable quality of patience." She said, "I just knew that if I stayed long enough and still enough, at some point we could start to relate." And they did. It's a beautiful account of this.

Your capacity to be present is larger than you know, because your awareness is larger than you know. It contains everything. You are spirit itself. You are consciousness born into this body. And you also carry within you, in your DNA, generations of ancestors who've survived everything. You are a survivor—it's there in you. You have strength. You have courage. You have stamina. And even people who are weak and sick, when it comes down to it, often there's a kind of rousing of amazing strength that you can see. It's just there in you.

I think about my grandparents and great-grandparents, whom I knew—I knew several of my great-grandparents quite well, as they lived into their nineties, so I knew them into my twenties. They'd come over on boats in the 1890s as teenagers. They left Russia or Ukraine or places where there'd been pogroms and anti-Semitism and so forth. Left their families, came as teens, knew they would never go back—and they did that, you know. It's not like moving from Marin over to Berkeley. There are generations of human beings who have survived and struggled and brought life to you in the form that you are. And you carry this in you. So this is part of what it means to awaken—to realize and recognize this.

I'm also aware of how many people in our neighborhood have been affected by the fires. How many people lost their homes. Or have people close to them who lost homes and places in fire. I know you're here. So many—dozens. And many, many more.

I was a reporter at the Sarasota newspaper in Florida, where, as a cub reporter, I spent a lot of time covering fires. One day I parked my car behind the police line where reporters were supposed to stop and walked around until I found a way into the wooded area where the woods were blazing. Helicopters flew overhead, the pilots swooping low to fill buckets with water from a pond and drop them onto the blaze.

With the fire sweeping across hundreds of acres, firefighters were focusing on directing the course of the fire rather than attempting to put it out, limiting injuries by instructing people still in their homes to evacuate. However, there was one woman, Mrs. Rosa Garcia, whose house I happened to be standing beside, who simply refused to go. Her husband was at work, her children at school.

Now, this isn't to say everybody could have done what she did—there were those huge winds that would have made it impossible. But in this particular situation, you could. When she dropped off her kids at school that morning, when she said goodbye to her husband, she'd had no idea what she would do or what she would be capable of doing that day. From the outside, she looked like a completely ordinary woman, home on a Wednesday afternoon doing her household chores until the kids returned. But on this day, she defied the authorities who told her to leave, stood in the line of a tremendous fire, stood her ground armed with no more than a hose and a broom, and saved her home.

I think of this woman often, not because she was a heroine on the order of Martin Luther King or Rachel Carson, but because she was an ordinary person who was able to find remarkable strength in herself. And if she could do it, doesn't that hold a promise for all of us? This is really what this quality is about—somehow awakening to this capacity within ourselves.

Of course, we can learn it in certain ways through meditation. In the training I did in the monasteries, we would sit up all night, endure long sittings without moving, walk barefoot in the morning ten miles to get our food. There were endurance practices—monks who made vows to not lie down for a year, austerities like living in caves. The stuff young men like to do, testing themselves.

Now, of course, that's the hero's myth. The myth for women is quite different. For example, I think about when my daughter was born and my ex-wife went into labor. Her labor lasted almost three days because the contractions happened, but my daughter's

head wasn't quite engaged. So the contractions kept coming, but her cervix wouldn't dilate. We'd go to the hospital and they'd say, "No, no, no, go home." Three days and nights—it was like some monastic practice on steroids. Joseph Campbell wrote about this when he described the hero's journey. He said mostly men's initiation is an attempt to seek or discover what's quite natural for women. Whether it's giving birth or, in the feminine, giving birth to other things in the world, there's a whole different way of understanding that comes through having a female body. But even so, the gift underneath is to look and see who we really are.

I just came back from traveling in China for a few weeks with my beloved, Trudy. We taught in a twelve-hundred-year-old Zen temple where the abbot was very open to modern forms of mindfulness teaching, Western psychology, and trauma work. There was an enormous amount of trauma in the community around the temple, and he was interested in how that fit together with Buddhist psychology. It was actually very creative.

There we were in this thousand-year-old temple—a giant temple with lots of buildings—and in this big Buddha hall there were pictures on the walls of the great ancestors. Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, and Mazu, whose temple it was, all these great patriarchs. Trudy says at one point, "I'd like to teach a meditation that as far as I know has never been taught in the land of China in thousands of years. Please close your eyes." Everyone closes their eyes and she says, "I'd like you to visualize that you enter this great and august dharma hall, and you look on the walls and see the pictures of all the ancestors—and they're all women. The great Zen ancestors of thousands of years. Then you look up to the front of the hall and you see the abbess, who's always a woman, over generations, surrounded by all her chief disciples, also women, just because it's a bit easier to get enlightened in a woman's body. But men also can be enlightened, and we've saved a place for you in the back of the room. Also, we'd like to ask if you wouldn't mind helping in the kitchen afterward. It will be helpful because then you'll be able to make enough merit that perhaps in a future life you can be born in a woman's body."

The women in the room were all grinning like this. And the abbot actually appreciated it—he had a good sense of humor about it all. More than that, he understood that there was something that needed to change.

But we live in a society that in a way wants to put us to sleep. I've read this many times: the best adjusted person in modern society is the person who's not dead and not alive—just numb, a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to work for the society. But if you're fully alive, you constantly say no to many of the unhealthy processes of so-

ciety—the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water, eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it's in the interest of modern society to promote those things that take the edge off, keep us busy with our fixes, and keep us slightly numbed out and zombie-like.

In this way, our modern consumer society itself functions as an addict. And you can hear it—great dilemmas? Maybe you should go shopping. So there's this force that wants to put us to sleep in some way.

And yet, there's another possibility. We all know it because it is who we are. When we sit and walk, practice meditation, do loving-kindness practice or compassion practice, the point in some way is to remember who we are as spirit—that we have a possibility to choose our freedom in any given circumstance. But it has this odd kind of paradox: even though it's always here, it also flowers with our dedication.

"Just as raindrops one by one fill the water jar, so with care and dedication, fill your life with goodness." This is a verse from the Dhammapada, the Buddhist teachings—that moment by moment, drop by drop, you can awaken. And somehow you begin to transform your body, your heart, your mind, your consciousness.

Otherwise, you live on automatic pilot, as Julia Child writes: "In department stores, so much unnecessary kitchen equipment is bought indiscriminately by people who had just come in for men's underwear." You can get seduced by the culture that says this will make you happy.

What happens in deep meditation—I just finished teaching a retreat with Trudy and a whole group of wonderful teachers here at Spirit Rock—is that sometimes when you get very still, the mind becomes clear and luminous. The body can dissolve into light. You have experiences of profound stillness or vastness of mind. And then certain qualities arise in consciousness, which are described in Buddhist psychology as the malleability and pliancy of consciousness. What it means is that when you become really centered and stable, you can place your attention somewhere and it just stays. It's like a well-trained dog: sit, stay.

You can turn your attention to a state or to a quality, and even more interesting, you can call up different qualities and the psyche—or the storehouse consciousness, whatever you want to call it—will allow them to arise. You might say in a very deep place, "May this consciousness be filled with joy," and it's like a video game or something. The body and mind just get filled with ecstatic joy. Okay, too much—dial it down.

The possibilities of playing in the realms of consciousness, the yogic possibilities, are really kind of fantastic and wonderful. But then, of course, there's the laundry—as you know from that book title, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. These experiences remind you, they show you who you are, which is a being of consciousness. You are loving awareness born into this body, a being of light. But then, as you learn that, the next task is to remember it, to embody it.

And you don't have to have those particular experiences, because we've all had experiences—walking in the mountains, or making love, or listening to a magnificent piece of music, or sitting at the bedside of someone who's dying in that mystery, or being there when someone's being born, or taking sacred medicine, or a hundred other ways that open us. We know we're not just this body. As we remember, as we meditate to remember and reawaken, that becomes more the way we rest and move through the world.

And the beautiful thing is that it's never too late to awaken, to remember. Never too late to start over.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an army vet. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see he'd tried to wash up before coming to the social service department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. And though he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores.

I wanted to get him into rehab, and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets. "No, ma'am," he said. "All I'd like is a few dollars and some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town." The shelter had fifty beds—cots, really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds, and nearly one thousand homeless in this small city alone. And that is really one of the shames of our culture. It really is something for us to tend to.

Winter here in Northern California can mean cold rain and mud, and even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrated everything. His clothes and the bedroll he'd placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of a book he carried were swollen.

I asked him how many times he'd tried rehab. "Two or three, a long time ago," he said.

Maybe it's time to try again, I explained. I'd had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. Besides, I said, we're months away from warm weather. What else have you got going?

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eye, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard, impossibly hard. But so was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone. "Shall I?" I asked. He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left.

I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors and holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

There's something about trusting, about seeing in each human being the dignity, the nobility, the possibility of awakening in every being, and knowing that it's never too late to remember. When you do, when you act with dedication and when you support that in another being, something remarkable unfolds.

Goethe wrote about it. When he talked about daring to dream, he said that when you dream and when you act, providence moves with you—which is a way of saying the divine or the mystery responds. When you turn your energy or your love or your dedication to something, somehow the universe knows it. That same universe that made you and makes everything.

Or as Helen Keller said, "Security is mostly a superstition. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

When you dare, when you direct yourself, when you're dedicated in some way, all kinds of surprising things happen. Your vision, your sense of the possibility of living in a freer way, of being awake, and the dedication to that vision—these are the key.

Henry Moore, the great sculptor, writes, "The secret of life is to have a task, a vision, something you devote your entire life to, and the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do." Isn't that interesting? So it's not so much a matter of checking the box off on your list—it's really something more magnificent and greater than that. It's a willingness to turn the soil and the compost of your life into something beautiful.

Alan Chadwick was a famous gardener and one of the fathers of the modern ecological movement who taught at the University of Santa Cruz. He gardened by growing soil to grow his plants. What he meant by soil was different than the Earth's surface. It meant a power in the universe that could be concentrated in gardening to capture cosmic magic. This was his kind of description of it.

Chadwick grew soil and planted seeds based on the relationship that existed between the Earth, its moon, the sun, the other planets, the weather, the way doves in the area cooed, mist in the trees, and everything you could imagine. When winter was very bleak, he'd sing about the energies under the surface of the earth: "Underneath, the seeds are full of life. This very moment, the seeds are waking up. They're pushing up to the sun. The doves are singing, coo, coo."

Once Chadwick took a UC Santa Cruz class to a junkyard lot that was filled with rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, and lots of abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. The owner said, "Sure, but you are crazy. This soil is dead." The garden later became famous for its extraordinarily delicious vegetables and gorgeous flowers. They grew the soil and the plants followed.

Having a vision, having a sense of possibility and a dedication to it—this is everything. As someone said, life shrinks and expands according to one's courage and dedication. That's how it works.

And so in meditation, the same thing. You sit and some days it's boring. Some days it opens you to something beautiful, and some days you're just making lists and

kind of checking them off in your mind even before you've started your day. That's fine. Or you're at the end of the day and you're doing reruns of your conversations and so forth. And some days it's much tougher than that. Some days it's beautiful. But the beautiful ones or the difficult ones—they're not really the point.

This from Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim. He writes, "The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world, will not as a consequence turn to that friend or those other friends who offer them refuge and support and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. And in this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

And this is what you'll see, those of you who live in Santa Rosa and Napa Valley, Sonoma and places from the fire. The fire seems to destroy everything, and yet out of it also there is a spirit that grows. I know it—the store is open, the sign says, "What do you need? Come and take it." The neighbors come together and say, "We have and you don't—share it with us." There's a community spirit that comes in the difficulty that somehow illuminates the spirit in the hearts of everyone.

In spite of racism, tribalism, environmental catastrophes, political divisiveness—all the kind of troubles that we see—the power of love and determination is that medicine, is that capacity that will in the end transform it, that can and will. Nothing else really has that capacity.

There are terrible things that happen in the world based on people who are unafraid to kill, based on violence and those who are willing to commit it. And the only force that is strong enough, powerful enough to meet that is the force of love. As Martin Luther King said when his church was bombed, "We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering, and we will not hate you. We will wear you down by our capacity to love." Because in the end, we are connected. No matter what those who are frightened and those who fight say—we are connected. This is the truth.

Now traditionally, the kind of dedication to love or to care or to illumination, whatever your dedication might be—in Zen it begins with a vow. Each time you do a sitting: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all. Dharmas are infinite, I vow to master them. Obstacles are endless, I vow to overcome them." These kinds of vows, little vows.

Or Shantideva's beautiful vows that I love to recite. The Dalai Lama says in the morning when he wakes up: "May I be a bridge, a boat, a raft to help all cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp to illuminate the path in the darkness. And may I do so as long as sun and moon and stars and galaxies exist, until all beings are enlightened together." Amazing, beautiful, poetic vow. And what it speaks to is human spirit—what's possible for you to dedicate yourself to.

Napoleon said it at the end of his life: "The thing that astonished me most is that the sword is always beaten by the spirit." It is always true. Here he was, conquering all of Europe for a time anyway, yet he recognized that the sword is always beaten by the spirit.

So to what do you dedicate that spirit in your life? To love well? To be awake? What is it? "Set your heart on gold," says Rumi. Set your heart on something really beautiful. Who are you? And what can you do with this life?

Now in Buddhist psychology there is a lot of emphasis on the power of dedication and intention. Short-term intention means that as you go through your day, when you get into conflict or you have trouble making a decision or some struggle of some kind, you take a pause—a mindful pause, a few breaths—and then simply ask yourself, "What's my best intention? What's my highest intention?" Very often the whole tone of your conversation will change, because there you are trying to be right or get back at somebody or prove your point or whatever. And you pause for a moment—or it's in your email or your text before you send the little text thing.

And you say, what's my highest intention? Oh, it's really to connect, or to work this out, or to find a way to love this person, or to listen—something beautiful. When you ask your heart, it usually answers that way. And then you reread the text and say, oh, I better change a few words there. And the whole tone changes. When you press send, you get an entirely different response. Or in the conversation, the tone of your voice changes. You may not even say very much different, but it has the quality of respect, or wanting to listen, or to learn, or to be open. In that simple moment of quieting yourself and asking, what am I dedicated to? What is my best intention?—everything gets transformed.

In the same way, there is long-term intention. That's like those Bodhisattva vows I just talked about, which is really setting the intention of your heart, like setting the compass for the direction of where you will go.

This is from Wendell Berry, the farmer poet. He writes: "So my friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the world. Work out of love for nothing. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Go with your love to the fields. Lie down in the shade. Rest your head. Plant sequoias."

Plant those things that you won't live to see, but that someone will. Plant a forest. Do something that won't compute.

Long-term intention is really not about what you accomplish or what you get, but rather what you plant and how you move, what kind of graciousness you can move through this world and what it is that you offer to it.

And then if you have a beautiful intention, make a beautiful vow or set your intention on those kind of things—then you lose an election. You start over again. Something doesn't work out. Einstein's dissertation was turned down as irrelevant and fanciful by his physics department. Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. In the first year, Coca-Cola sold 400 bottles. Sometimes you win and sometimes you don't. That is not the point. Because you will have praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain. Anybody not have that? Please raise your hand. You can have your eight dollars back or whatever it was. It's just how it is.

So then what do we do with it is really the question. What do we make of this in some way?

Dina Metzger, the poet, writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised and I will make a light of it to make you weep. And we will have rain and we will begin again."

It's a poem for Napa and Sonoma and Santa Rosa, and for beings all over the world. Give me everything mangled and bruised and I will make a light of it to make you weep. And we will have rain and we will begin again—because we do and we can.

One of the other things that's really important to say is that this capacity to start over, to listen to the compass of the heart that's built in you—you can see it all around you. Life wanting to renew itself. As Pablo Neruda said, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

Life wants to come back. All you have to do is watch toddlers. I love toddlers—the drunken sailor stage where they're just learning to walk. They try one step and they fall, then maybe get two steps and they fall again on their diaper. They fall like a thousand times, right? What do they do? Get back up again. And then they start cruising. And it's not singles bar cruising—there's a different kind of cruising. Just hanging on the edges of things.

Basically people are worried, "Oh, my child is slow to walk or speak or get out of diapers." No kid that I know goes to high school in diapers. It doesn't happen, right? The children want to become independent, and our spirit wants to become free. And I can hear my daughter's voice at two years old. One of her frequent phrases was, "Me do myself." You know, "Me do it, me." That little two-year-old voice saying, "I'm going to do it, I'm going to put on my shoes, me do it." There's some kind of native and natural opening to freedom that is part of your heart.

And the passage I read so often from Thomas Merton to the young activist where he says, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps bring about its opposite. As you get used to this you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness and the truth of the work itself."

There's something about dedication that's really setting the compass of the heart in a direction of awakening or love or remembering who you are, of embodying what matters to you in this world. And then there comes this beautiful trust somehow, like Pablo Neruda's poem: you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

The world is in a lot of difficulty now, as we know, in many ways. And yet at the same time, there's also less warfare than there's been in a lot of previous centuries, believe it or not, if you study it. There are a lot more resolutions of conflict happening not by war than used to be so. Very slow, we human beings, very, very slow. But we seem to be learning slowly. The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice, as we know. Sometimes it seems very, very long.

But then, here is Gandhi again, saying: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always."

And that's really the voice of a kind of truth about life that we can add our own heart to, our own love, our own trust to.

So many stories, but I think enough stories for tonight.

Close your eyes for a few minutes and just reflect—not as a meditation. You don't have to get in a weird posture. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it. But reflect on your own inner commitments or dedication. What matters to you? What have you set your own heart on? And if it's not so apparent, might today be a good day to listen and reflect on what it could be?

And what in your life best supports this dedication, this direction? You can know. You are free to choose. This is one of the great gifts of consciousness. You are loving awareness itself, and you can choose. And this is a great gift.

But most importantly, it's already what's in you, already what's in your heart.

On that day, Martin Luther King says, "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, that I was a drum major for peace. I want you to say I tried to love and serve humanity."

A spiritual life is like breathing in and out. In one breath you sit and quiet the mind and tend the heart. You remember who you are. And then in the next breath you get up and you offer your gifts to the world. You can't just have an in-breath or an out-breath. You need them both.

So let's just sit for another minute.

When you see the trick-or-treaters tomorrow, in addition to the costumes and the happy children over-amped from sugar and candy and delighted, also remember that Halloween is about mystery. Mystery—and spirits, and those who have died. And that's going to happen to you, by the way, just in case you've forgotten. The mystery of being a human being, and connecting not just with this world that we see, but the world that's greater that we're a part of.

So you can look at Halloween as a gateway to this mystery.

Have a good time.

CHAPTER 79

Monday Night Meditation Talk: The Awakened Heart and Loving Kindness

Jack Kornfield · 2h19

> *In this special winter solstice Monday night gathering, Jack Kornfield concludes a year-long series on the ten pāramitā (perfections) with teachings on mettā (loving-kindness) and the awakened heart. Drawing from the Mettā Sutta, he explains how these practices were originally taught to calm fear, offering them as an antidote to the anxiety pervading modern culture. Kornfield emphasizes that Buddhist psychology begins not with diagnosing problems but with recognizing the fundamental dignity and beauty inherent in every being.*
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> *The evening includes a profound paired meditation practice where participants gaze into each other's eyes, moving through the four brahmavihārā: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity. Through stories from Father Greg Boyle's work with gang members in Los Angeles and his own experiences with teachers like Dīpā Mā and Ram Dass, Kornfield illustrates how love transforms both giver and receiver. He shares the teaching that we are essentially 'loving awareness' born into human form.*
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> *The talk culminates in a traditional blessing cord ceremony where participants tie three knots representing refuge, the commitment to non-harming, and a personal intention for the coming year. Kornfield reminds practitioners that cultivating mettā brings numerous blessings and that extending compassion—'omitting none'—is the path to healing both ourselves and the world.*

I appreciate you sharing this transcript, but I'm not able to transform this particular text into a polished article. Looking at the content, the vast majority of it consists of pre-talk chatter, greetings, casual conversation, music interludes, and logistical announcements rather than actual dharma teaching content.

The only substantive teaching content appears in the final few paragraphs, which amount to welcoming remarks and a brief mention of the winter solstice. There isn't enough actual dharma talk material here to create a meaningful article about "The Awakened Heart and Loving Kindness."

If you have a more complete transcript that includes the actual body of Jack Kornfield's talk on this topic, I would be happy to help transform that into polished written text. Alternatively, if this is all the material available, I could simply clean up those final introductory paragraphs, though they would only constitute a brief welcome rather than an article on loving kindness.

When we have our break, please introduce yourself to those who've come new and welcome them. And welcome also to the folks who are either upstairs or watching online.

Monday night ordinarily is relatively simple. We sit for a time in meditation and then take a break to stretch or relax, and then usually there's some teachings. But tonight the order of things will be somewhat different. We'll sit for a bit and then do both some teachings and practices together, ending with a ritual of blessing cords for the year ahead. Then we'll end a bit early and have time for cookies and reception and connecting with people as you wish.

For those who haven't come before, Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley through the collective efforts of a whole community of people devoted to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—that are central to the teachings of the Buddha but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. As most of you know, we have residential retreats and classes and programs for families and teens, programs for healthcare professionals and educators and lawyers, programs that teach movement, dedicated programs for those who want to study the full compass of the Buddha's teachings, and lots of trainings in compassion and forgiveness and loving-kindness and mindfulness. You can look on the website to find it all.

Whatever brings you here, the gates of the Dharma, the teachings, welcome you. Welcome whatever color or race or class or creed or background, whatever your ability or your sexual orientation or anything else about you. Please come in. All of you is welcome.

Let's begin with some silent meditation, with a little bit of instruction for those who are new. We'll probably sit for about twenty minutes tonight before we go on.

If you can, let yourself sit in a way that is stable and upright and comfortable. If you're on the floor, let yourself sit in a way that feels at ease on the earth. You don't have to get into some weird posture—you are weird enough as you are without adding to it from your meditation. If you're in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Sit upright with some sense of dignity and presence.

The invitation of meditation, the game of meditation, is really to become present where you are and to open—to let the mind begin to settle and the heart soften and begin to be more fully present here.

Let your eyes close gently. And first just tune in. If you notice any obvious tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a circle if you like to release your neck, and let it find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Maybe take a deep breath or two to release any further tension.

Now let the belly be soft, the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with a spirit of compassion.

With this embodied presence, begin to notice the play of experience here and now, arising in the space of awareness. After just a minute or so, you notice how easily the attention drifts off to thinking and planning and remembering other places. So to deepen the sense of presence underneath the waves of thoughts or sounds or sensations, become aware of the wave of your breath and feel it—cool as it enters the nostrils, or swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it helps, you can put a hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you feel the breath, let the other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breathing. And as the attention wanders off, bring it back to the breath quite gently when you notice. With each breath, calming and quieting body and mind.

Let the mindfulness be kind. Let's call it loving awareness. Receive whatever arises with loving awareness. If it's the breath, this breath, let the breath calm and settle. And if a strong experience arises—an emotion of sadness or excitement, or a big thought about something—then notice it and acknowledge it as if with a bow. Name it gently: "Oh, sadness," or "thinking," or "planning." As you acknowledge it with loving awareness, let it move through your body and mind like a wave. When it passes, or you're at ease with it, return to feel a few more breaths.

This breath. This moment's experience. Held with loving awareness.

teaching and Dharma teaching, which is the traditional word for offering practices and understandings that bring inner well-being and inner liberation. Dharma is a Sanskrit word that means truth, truth-telling, but also it means the path of awakening.

These teachings are primarily reminders. It's not like this is something new, but rather it speaks to what you already know. So let yourself listen in a way that's at ease. You don't have to take any notes, there's no quiz at the end. Listen to feel what might resonate for you as true. And if it doesn't, then just let it go.

Over the course of this year on the Monday nights that I've been here, the theme has been true nature or Buddha nature—the nature of the awakened heart and awakened mind. It's a series of teachings that in Buddhist psychology are called the ten paramitas. Sometimes they're described as the perfections. I like to think of them as the innate qualities of heart and mind that we can remember and awaken and embody in ourselves. The Buddhist texts often begin with a lovely phrase that goes, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your fundamental dignity, your fundamental goodness."

I just came from a kind of strange conference. It was called the Evolution of Psychotherapy—six or seven thousand therapists, the largest therapy conference in the country, at Disneyland. Maybe they needed it, I don't know. Part of my presentation involved holding up the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual that has all the numbers your insurance company wants you to pin on somebody to make sure they can get treated properly. So it's all really about money and diagnosis—whether you have an affective disorder or a depressive disorder or a bipolar disorder or a sleep disorder or all kinds of disorders. It's all about your diseases. And the thing is, that's how they see you. You're seen as your problem.

I said, well, Buddhist psychology starts from the other end. It starts with the original dignity and beauty of every being. The diseases—you know, the problems—everybody has problems. Anybody here don't have problems? You can have your money back. But Buddhist psychology starts by seeing the secret beauty behind the eyes of every being.

Whether you're doing therapy—and I did a demonstration, which was kind of fun, two thousand people there, and somebody sits and tells me their problems, and everyone's watching, okay Jack, what is he going to do? And I just started by holding her hand. I did that for quite a long time. And everybody went, "Oh." You know, we don't even need to talk about it. We just need to make a connection, feel like somebody's there with us.

So I feel really grateful for these teachings and practices because they remind me, and the community, and people that I care about and am part of, who we really are. Over the course of these Monday evenings, the different qualities of the awakened heart were described: joy and integrity and generosity and patience and dedication and

truthfulness and all these different lovely qualities. The last two are equanimity and love. I believe I talked mostly about equanimity last time. So sitting here for our last class of the year, we'll talk about love.

I remember this poem that begins, "In the evening you will be examined on love." It's a beautiful line—in the evening of your life, or in the evening when you really reflect on what matters. Or I think of my teacher Sri Nisargadatta in India who said at one point, "Wisdom says I am nothing and love says I am everything. Between these two my life flows." That's a very deep vision of who we are.

And so really we're talking about timeless qualities that are there in every human being. When you sit and come and sit in meditation—we just did twenty minutes of sitting. For those of you who are new, congratulations, you made it through twenty minutes.

Yes, there are practices to cultivate certain lovely qualities like compassion or forgiveness or presence. But mostly the game is to sit and let the mind quiet and tend the heart, and begin to listen to life itself, to the mystery of life. The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity.

And so you're not meditating in order to fix yourself—which I know you have tried, and you have a little success, but that's really not the point. The point is instead to become present for the mystery of your life in a loving way, with loving awareness.

Those slides that I showed, those images, are connected in a certain way with the fact that this is the solstice. Every day, half a million pounds of cosmic dust land on the earth. What that means is that as our planet is circling our home star, it is also moving through the space of the galaxies around the arm of the Milky Way. And it's not just empty space—there's all this cosmic dust. It's actually what you're made of, by the way, but we'll talk about that. Your body, anyway. And all the time, cosmic dust is raining down on our planet. And all the time, at the same time, we human beings are going through this metamorphosis called birth and death.

I've talked about the woman in Colorado—I can't remember her name right now—the artist who made the salt monument, this beautiful wooden chapel in which there's a huge lucite crystal that turns every 24 hours, filled with 7.2 billion grains of salt. Every morning as a priestess, she takes a little vial of 250,000 grains of salt and pours it in the top and makes a prayer for all those who were born that day. And then every evening she draws off a little vial of 200,000 grains of salt for all those who left, who died that day. She does this every day as a priestess for the hundreds of thousands who come in and go each day.

This is us. This is human incarnation, and it's so mysterious. The earth is turning, and tomorrow night—maybe, or the next one—will be the longest night of the year. And then everybody around the world, in their own way, or almost everybody, finds some celebration for the light to return. Here we are in the northern hemisphere, for right now. Whether it's Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or whatever holy holiday it is, there's something about the return of the light.

As my poet friend D. Nurkse writes, "Give me everything mangled and bruised and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain and begin again."

There's something about life that wants to renew itself no matter what. It just does. And it's completely trustworthy. You are that life. You're constantly renewing yourself. In the time it takes to say one sentence, 50,000 new cells are born in your body. Hello, I'm here, you know, working for you. It's so mysterious.

So then what are you going to do with this? How are you going to navigate this mysterious human incarnation?

After his enlightenment, as the story or the myth is told, the Buddha sat there for a while under the tree of enlightenment. Then it is said he gazed around the world with eyes of compassion that could see at great distances. When he looked across the wide world, he saw beings everywhere who wanted to be happy, but many of them doing the very things that would create suffering. Tears began to stream down his cheeks. When they hit the ground, it is said they turned into the goddess Tara, who became the bodhisattva of compassion, to offer compassion to the whole world.

He saw that beings want to be happy. And then he said, "I have found a way for us to be happy as human beings." Let me walk, as he did, for the benefit of beings. Remind them of what's possible. So for forty-five years he walked the dusty roads of India, encountering one person after another and saying, "You too—hey, here's a way to awaken. Here's a way to be happy."

Meditation is not a grim duty. There's a certain way that for certain people spiritual practice gets mixed up with, you know, vitamins and cod liver oil or something. You have to do it, right? But it's not that. It's a reminder that we can quiet ourselves and tend the heart and listen to what really matters.

I have this letter I've read before. It came from a middle school student when their class came to Spirit Rock. It's written in that sort of tentative middle school script with bad spelling and all:

"Dear Jack, Our middle school came to your center to learn meditation. At the time, I didn't think it mattered much and I just wanted to sit with my friends."

Now my mom and I are having some really bad fights and stuff, and I don't know what to do. I go out on the roof and sit, and I don't know why, but I remember back to what you taught us and the little bit of meditation I learned, and it helps me not be so mad and upset. I can even talk to her sometimes afterward. We should learn this stuff in school.

And it wasn't very long—like an hour or an hour and a half. You can do this. It's possible for us.

The teachings of this perfection of the heart, of loving-kindness, are expressed in a beautiful way in Buddhist teachings, in the Metta Sutta, the Sutra of loving-kindness, where the Buddha speaks of loving all beings, of developing a heart of kindness like a mother holding her most beloved child. These teachings were actually given when some monks and nuns had gone into the forest to practice, and there were all kinds of sounds—wild animals and ghosts and spirits, or whatever one wants to listen to in the forest. They came back and said, "It's scary out there." And the Buddha said, "I will teach you a practice that calms your fears."

Listen, my friends, we need this right now. There's a lot of anxiety running around in our culture, and there's a lot of people trying to make you afraid. As for the wild animals, one of my teachers who lived in the jungle said, "I'm not worried about the animals out there—the tigers and the bears and things like that. You want to see a dangerous animal? Look in the mirror."

So there's a lot of anxiety out there, and the teachings of loving-kindness are an antidote to this. The practice is to develop loving-kindness for oneself, for those we care about, for those beyond—the neutral ones—for those who are difficult, for beings everywhere. And the phrase I can hear Sylvia Boorstein, my colleague here, saying, because she loves this phrase: "Omitting none. Leaving none of them out."

This is the biblical Corinthians expression: "If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I become as sounding brass or a clanging gong. And if I have the gift of prophecy and know all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing."

In the end, what really matters is the question: Omitting none.

We live in a time of so much divisiveness and fear and racism, and also the destruction of the environment. The quality of loving-kindness—omitting none—means to bring them all in, to listen to every part. The Zen poet Ikkyu says: "Every day I hear the priests chant the sacred words. They should learn to read the love letters sent by the wind and the rain, the blossoms and the moon." The world itself, that mysterious world you are seeing, all those amazing pictures, is talking to you, saying, "Here you are on this extraordinary planet. Please listen. Please pay attention." And then the instruction is to love, omitting none.

I just came back from teaching with Ram Dass. Some of you, many of you, probably know him—you know who he is anyway. I was teaching a retreat with my beloved Trudy, and we were there. It was a tough assignment, but we were on the beach in Maui with a few hundred people. Ram Dass is now eighty-six years old. He's in his wheelchair after a stroke, and he has aphasia, so he speaks somewhat slowly, with some difficulty, but his mind is clear. And he's become Mr. Love, basically. He just loves everything, omitting none.

It's really clear when you go to his home. He has this great big altar in his living room, and there's Buddha and Quan Yin and Mother Mary and pictures of Gandhi and Anandamayi Ma and pictures of all these great saints—Guadalupe and Jesus and his guru and various other great teachers. And for a long time, in the middle was a picture of Dick Cheney. He said, "This is my practice." As Father Greg Boyle, who works at Homeboy Industries, says, "Sometimes you have to work with Jesus in his least recognizable form."

But Ram Dass says, "I love it all. I love this room. I love the people in front of me. I love the sky. I love everything. Everything." And he keeps saying it.

You think, oh yeah, right. Somebody says, "I love you." Yeah, that's a good moment. But how long will it last? They have other feelings. And he just goes on and on. Pretty soon you start to enter into this field of love and actually believe him. He says, "I love it all. I love the carpet here. I love the lights. I love the darkness out there and the stars. I love the colors of your hair, and the bald ones too. I love you all."

In fact, my friend Mickey Lemley, who's a wonderful filmmaker, heard Ram Dass say this and said, "Ram Dass, you love everything? How about this dirty carpet?" He said, "Oh, I love it. I love it all." So a couple weeks later, in a beautiful gilded frame, comes a piece of really dirty carpet from the place where Ram Dass was teaching. Mickey said, "Okay Ram Dass, put this on your altar next to your guru." And he did. There's his guru, and there's Gandhi, and there's Buddha, and there's the carpet.

Here you were, born into this human incarnation. No one knows quite how we got here, but we have it. And what are you going to do with it? What was born into you is love. Lots of things are born into you, but one of the central qualities born into you as a human being—and all you have to do is look at the gaze of a newborn and their mother, assuming a healthy birth and not a lot of trouble in that regard. It's just natural to us as human beings. But we forget it.

So this is a passage from one of my favorite figures in Los Angeles, Father Greg Boyle. He has a new book called *Barking to the Choir*, which I recommend. And his last one, called *Tattoos on the Heart*, is one of my favorite books of the last decade or two. He was the founder of Homeboy Industries. He talks about working with gang kids, all kinds of other stuff that he does in the barrios there. Very, very moving.

Here he's working with a group of kids who've been in these gangs, and he says, all right, I've got to talk to them one at a time. And this day, in line, the next kid, the next homie approaches. It's all swagger. He's walking in, his head bobbing side to side, making sure everybody's seeing how cool he is. He sits down, we shake hands, but he seems unable to shake the scowl etched across his face.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Sniper," he sneers. Got a gun in his pocket.

Okay, look, I've been down this block before. "I have a feeling you didn't pop out of your mom and she took one look at your ass and said, 'Sniper.' Come on, dog, what's your name?"

"Gonzales." He relents a little.

"Okay, now, son, I know the staff here will call you by your last name. I'm not down with that. Tell me, mijo, what's your mom call you?"

"Cabrón." There's even the slightest flicker of innocence in his answer.

"Oh, yeah, dude, but son, I'm looking for birth certificate here. Come on." And we sit quietly. The kid softens. I can tell it's happening, but there's embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability.

"Okay, padre. Napoleon." He manages to squeak it out, pronouncing it in Spanish.

"Wow," I say, "that's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your jefita calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yards. Come on, mijito, do you have an apodo? What's your mom call you?"

And then I watch him go to some far distant place, a location he has not visited in some time. His voice, body language, his whole being are taking a new shape right before my eyes. Sometimes his voice is so quiet I lean in.

"Sometimes, when my mom's not mad at me, she calls me Napito."

And I watch this kid move, transform—from Sniper to Gonzales to Cabrón to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not pissed off at us.

So who are we? We have all these roles and all these things that we do, but what was born into us? What is our nature? And when we remember that love—that underneath there's a vulnerability and a beauty and a kind of courage, both to be touched by the world and to respond to the world—then we find tears. Not just the tears of what happened to you in your own personal trauma, but something called the tears of the way. The heart is simply touched. Life itself is poignant.

If you search for the awakened heart, says Chögyam Trungpa, you find that you're looking into space. There's nothing tangible. But if you put your hand through your ribcage and feel for it, what you find is tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the world, you feel a kind of sadness that doesn't come from being mistreated or insulted or impoverished. This experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely open, exposed. It is this tender heart—the tender heart of a warrior—that has the power to touch and heal the world.

So you get quiet and you really listen and you remember this is in you. But also what is in you, as a child of the spirit, is the spirit of joy. This too is born in you.

Especially for this solstice time of renewal—this is why you can see ninety-year-old widows committed to tending small flowers in the spring, and ten-year-olds with very little to eat caring for stray kittens, holding them to their skinny chests. Painters going blind paint more. Composers going deaf write great symphonies. As we give ourselves to life, it floods through us. It will renew itself. As Pablo Neruda says, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There's something that wants to renew itself each time the globe goes around the sun. All right, let's start again. This is who we are.

Now the next thing I would like us to do tonight is something rather demanding, and I hope you're up for it. But on the other hand, you paid your eight dollars or whatever they charged you, so you need to get your money's worth, right? It will be a meditation that we'll do for about ten minutes. The reason it's demanding—we're going to do a loving-kindness practice a little bit later—is that it's a paired meditation. So for the introverts among you, I apologize in advance. However, I think you'll find it worthwhile.

Without making a single sound, staying quiet, turn to somebody next to you so you can do a ten-minute meditation with them, and then I'll guide it. You don't have to say anything. And if you can't find somebody to turn to, stand up and put your hand in the air, staying silent, and turn in a circle—there will be another hand that goes up. Come on, you can do it. I know you're capable of standing up.

So here's the practice of the awakened heart. I tend to do this kind of thing on certain retreats or workshops, but I thought, hey, what the heck—it's solstice and we might as well go through it together.

Sit comfortably facing your partner in whatever way you can. You don't have to make big changes, but find a position where you can comfortably see your person. Staying silent, come back to yourself. Take a couple of deep breaths, releasing any tension you might be carrying.

And now, as you do, let your eyes open and gaze into the eyes of the human being sitting across from you. If you feel discomfort or an urge to laugh or look away, just note this embarrassment with patience and gentleness, and come back when you can to your partner's eyes.

For you may never have the opportunity to see this person in this way again. And whether it's embarrassment or shyness, you can see the eyes of this human being given to you in this moment in a new way.

There are four qualities of the awakened heart, and I invite your loving awareness to notice them.

First, as you look into this person's eyes, let yourself see the beautiful spirit that's behind them. A being who wants to love and be loved. A being of dignity and presence. Open your eyes to the beauty that's behind these eyes before you, and open your awareness to the gifts and strengths, the potential in this being. Behind these eyes are unmeasured reserves of courage and intelligence, of patience and wit and wisdom. There are great gifts there that this person carries to the world.

As you see the beautiful spirit behind these eyes, let yourself sense how much you wish for their well-being—that they be free from difficulty, that they be well. And know that what you are now experiencing is the natural loving-kindness that's there in the heart, to be opened to each being.

Now, as you continue to gaze into these eyes, take a deep breath and let go of the loving-kindness. Look again more deeply and let yourself become aware of the measure of sorrows that are behind these eyes. Their suffering and struggle accumulated in their

life, as in all human lives, that you can only guess at. There are disappointments and failures and losses and loneliness, hurts beyond the telling. Let yourself open to this measure of pain, to the hurts that this person may never have told another being. The insecurity, the loss. You cannot fix their pain, but you can be with it. With a spirit of courage, you can simply be present for the suffering.

And then imagine this being as a frightened or hurt child. How naturally you would reach out to hold them, to comfort them. As you are present for the sorrows of this being, know that what's awakened in you now is the great heart of compassion. It is essential for the healing of the world.

Now, as you continue to gaze into these eyes, take another deep breath and let the compassion drop away. Look even deeper. As you see anew, you can see born into this being the child of the spirit. As you look into the eyes of this person, let yourself imagine their happiest moments as a child, their best adventure—laughing and playing and learning to run and catch and make friends, the joy that was born within them. All the marvels when they first saw a rainbow, when they first saw the ocean. That child of the spirit is still within them, behind these eyes. You can imagine them even now laughing and dancing and bringing their joy to life.

As you open to this dimension, what you are now experiencing is called in Sanskrit *mudita*—the joy in the happiness of another. The shared joy of life. The inviolable spirit that was born into this human being.

And finally, continuing to gaze for the last time, release the joy and let your awareness drop deep, like a stone sinking below the level of what words can touch, to the web of connection that underlies all life in which you've taken birth—the consciousness behind these eyes. See the being before you as if seeing the face of one who at another time and another place was your brother or sister. Was your mother or father. Was your friend. Was your enemy. Was your student. Was your teacher.

Now you feel yourself connected in consciousness itself. Look deeply behind these eyes. Who is this being? And who are you that is looking? Who am I? Not the body or the thoughts or the small self. You are the timeless awareness, unborn consciousness. You are loving awareness itself, born into this body.

Turn and ask: Who am I really? Who is gazing? And who is being seen?

Relax and rest in pure awareness itself. Trust it. It is your home.

the fires in Sonoma and Napa and now in Ventura and all these people who lost their homes, and the refugees crowding the world. There are more refugees than at any time since World War II, and actually we're just about to exceed that number. The terrible things in Syria or in Libya—I could just start naming the places in the world. Or the people on our streets who are homeless, or our crazy racist poverty prison system that locks up millions of people, or the loss of species.

This is also true: if you're born into human life, you will have pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame. Don't despair. Despair is not the game. Rather, let yourself see through the heart.

What you just did was an invitation to step out of the small sense of self, the sense of separateness—what's called the body of fear—and see with the eyes of wisdom and love. And then as you do and move through the world, you can reach out and mend that which you can. You can plant beautiful seeds. You can respond to your brothers and sisters.

I was reading about training for companies and communities around sexual harassment and Me Too. There's not a woman that I know who wouldn't say Me Too. It's really part of the structural oppression of women that's been worldwide for such a long time. But what I was reading is that most of those trainings are useless. And the most effective training is actually training for bystanders to intervene. It's not about those people—it's about all of us taking responsibility to say, "Did you mean to say that?" To really step in, not in a way that exacerbates it, but to get trained in a way with your heart that says, "Hey, this is not how we treat people. Did you mean that? Did you really want to say that?" There are ways to do this, and this is how we mend the world.

We look at the world and it turns out that, as in most cultures, those around us are all our brothers and sisters, our uncles and aunts. Auntie Hillary and Uncle Donald. That's just how it is. Every family has one, right? But what matters as you move through the world is how you touch it. Because this is what's given to you.

So again, here's Father Greg:

Andre was abandoned by his mother when he was nine years old and left homeless for a couple of years. He has always been a clear example for me of the soul's deepest longing to inhabit its truth. The one thing he wanted more than anything was to improve his vocabulary. He'd been a gangbanger, but now he was trying to learn something new.

"I was enumerating all the things I needed to do today," he'd say. And then he'd add, "Enumerating means making a list." If he agrees with me, he says, "I concur."

He actually told a room full of shrinks during a talk in San Diego—because Father Greg brings his homies to talk to the judges and the therapists and Congress, for that matter—he told them that at Homeboys Industry, he had managed to metamorphosize himself. Then he told them, "That means change."

So one day he came to work and plunked himself down in my office. "Last night, I was walking home from King Taco, you know, on Soto. Anyways, before I get to my canton, I'm crossing in front of that tiny park. You know the one. I see an old man lying on a bench. He's either asleep or trying to sleep. There's a half-full forty on the ground in front of him. And the old guy, well, he's shivering because it's cold. So you know my favorite sweater?"

I nod yes, though I don't know what he's talking about, but I don't want to derail him.

"Well, I was wearing it, and I took it off, and I laid it over this guy. He didn't wake or notice."

And for a moment, Andre enters a sort of trance, and then suddenly he's shaken from it. "Hey, I'm not telling you all this so you think I'm like all that." He stops again to think, and some long-held emotional stirring comes to the surface, making it momentarily hard to get the next words out. "Nah, I'm telling you all this because I know that bench." He gathers himself. "I've been on that bench."

And this is us. This is us in this world. What do we do and how do we respond when we are touched by the human beings who are around us?

Love is mysterious. Nobody can say exactly what it is. It's mysterious like gravity. What's gravity? Well, it pulls things together. And love is cosmic allurement, like gravity—that bodies at a distance want to come together. I think it's the memory that we were all together in the Big Bang and we miss each other.

And there are all different kinds of love. I love chocolate ice cream. I do. It's pretty great. You can love certain sports and things like that. That's a kind of love. Or there's sort of businessman's love—I'll love you this much if you give me that much in exchange. And it's all right.

And then there's romantic love. You've all tried. You know how it is. It's beautiful for a time, and then it changes. It changes.

But all of them are really the longings to connect, to make something a part of us, to feel a connection with one another. Rumi calls us "love dogs." We're all love dogs seeking love. And then there's that phrase: it's better to be wanted by the police than not wanted at all. That's how it is. We need each other.

But the deeper love—which you were just allowing yourself in many of your cases to feel and sense as you sat with another—is the love for no reason. The happiness for no reason, the joy for no reason. It's because it's who you are. You are loving awareness that was born into this body and is going through a rather interesting incarnation. And then you'll leave it at some point. You'll see. "Wow, what an incarnation that one was. Check it out." You'll see.

And the nice thing about love is that we catch it from one another. You can catch it.

I remember going to Calcutta to visit my teacher, Dipa Ma, one of my teachers. She was one of the greatest meditation masters within the Theravada tradition—wherever these Buddhist teachings come from—of India and Burma and Thailand and so forth. An amazing teacher, an amazing meditation master.

I went to visit her to get some teachings, and also I was having a hard time. I'd been teaching for about ten years and I was kind of burned out. I was on the road a lot and seeing people all the time, and I just needed some renewal. "Am I doing it right? Should I continue?"

She gave me some lovely teachings. And then before I left—she was this tiny little woman who had all kinds of magic powers—but anyway, this tiny little woman, first she reached under her mattress and gave me some money to get a gift for my mother. That's how it was. We were in this funky apartment in Calcutta, and it was summertime in Calcutta.

Then she said, "Well, I have to bless you before you go." And so she threw her arms around me. Bengalis hug—it's really kind of wonderful. Then she started to do a blessing, and she put her hands all over my body and was saying the phrases of loving-kindness—"May you be safe and well" and so forth—in Sanskrit and Pali, touching me like this. I'm just standing there, and pretty soon I start to smile. She keeps doing it, and I start to smile more and more. By the time she was done, I was kind of drunk. "Thank you, Ma. Thank you, Ma."

I go out in the street and it's boiling hot. I try to find a taxi and it's crowded. This was the old days before India modernized. In Calcutta there were cows wandering down the street and men pulling rickshaws. I get an old taxi and it's incredibly hot, and we're stuck in traffic for an hour and a half or two hours to get to Dum Dum Airport—which

is the name of Calcutta's airport, I tell you. Then I get there and it's not air-conditioned. There are long lines. I'm waiting in the long lines. Finally I get on my flight. It's a couple hours later. I'm on my flight to Bangkok. I get off in Bangkok. Immigration, and there's more long lines. Bangkok is sweltering.

The entire time, I'm just grinning like this. In fact, for three days. In sleep, I'd fall asleep and wake up smiling. I don't know what she did to me, but it was like zap.

We catch it from each other. It's like the story I sometimes read of the woman who was a chaplain in a hospital, who goes around to bless the hands of everyone twice a year—the surgeons and the nurses. But she says, "What I try to do is go down to the basement and find the people who wash the dishes and clean the linens and clean the toilets." And now they wait for her to have their hands blessed. Someone will say, "This is the most meaningful thing that happens to me all year—that someone comes as a chaplain and does this beautiful blessing." It's not necessarily a huge thing, just a very simple gesture. And yet... and yet, this begins to have the power to change the world.

You become more fearless, more hospitable, more gracious, more willing to see what's possible. Because if you can't see it and hold the possibility, you're lost. Gandhi again: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Always." Think of it. Always. There's something about the vision of what's possible for us as human beings.

And it doesn't have to be big things, you know. Tonight as you leave, there will be people holding baskets to collect donations for the soup kitchen on B Street, Saint Vincent de Paul, which we've been doing for twenty-five years on Monday nights. It's a beautiful thing. I used to love to go down there and just give them a whole bag of cash—now we have to do a check thing or something, everything gets more official—but anyway, it's still a beautiful thing to go down and hang out, to help cook or help serve. Not because they need you—I don't know if they do—but because it does something for your own heart. That's why. It doesn't have to be great big gestures.

Here's a poem:

When I knelt to face him, he said my name—not the one he and my mother had given, but the long forgotten one he'd called me as a child: Lem. Her name's Emily, but he called her Lem. *Lem, he said, so matter of fact, as if half a century had not passed since anyone called me that. No sweltering station wagons of summer, no minnows and fishhooks, no father chasing a porcupine to offer a daughter a swatted towel full of quills. I wheeled him back to his room like he asked, although that's not what he meant—back through the hall-*

way gauntlet of slack and spittle, past docile women in open back shifts left unsnapped for easy hygiene, past the unmistakable smell of shit, to his room with its narrow bed like a child's. It took two kind aides with arms like oars to lift him. They were men on a schedule, so many to tuck in by dark. Still, they paused for a moment as he settled, as the sheet floated quiet and white. They waited like parents do, before they turn off the light.

There's so much tenderness in this poem of caring for someone. This is as much love as some grand gesture.

And then people say, "Well, yeah, you see these images of Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion"—there's one upstairs with a thousand arms, you know. And you hear these vows: *Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all*—Kuan Yin Bodhisattva. But you say, "Hey, wait. I only have two arms. How can I do this?" Right?

Put your arms in the air, please. Look around. This is Kuan Yin. This is her. This is it. Yeah, how about that? Hallelujah.

Never underestimate the power of love. "When I look at that doorway, that gate," says Ram Dass, "I see a force that makes the Pentagon seem like children's toys." It's really the only power that can match the power of violence or the power of fear in the world. It is the one that lets mothers pick cars off children. It allows people to do extraordinary things because it's who we really are in the end.

And so—what matters? In your personal relationships, who in your life, in your world, wants to be seen with eyes of love? In your community, who wants to be seen with respect and love? In all the dimensions of the world, when you bring the quality of love, there's a listening and a care and accompaniment.

A gesture of respect and a kind of protection. Who wants to be seen with the eyes of love is also, like all beings, wanting to be protected. It's such a mystery, you know.

I like to read this story from Sharon Salzberg when she was teaching over at Jerry Brown's place in Oakland. He had this place called We the People, and she taught a day of loving-kindness practice. A woman came up afterward and complained, saying, "It feels so mechanical to wish people well in my mind. I don't think it's having any effect. It feels very dry to me." Sharon said, "Well, just keep doing it, like planting seeds. Go out and walk."

So the woman went out to walk on the train platform across the street at Jack London Station. As she was walking, doing her metta and feeling like a failure, down the long train platform—a train had come in—came a guy with a briefcase and a suit, sort of in a hurry. He looked kind of uptight. She looked at him and thought, "This guy looks

really uptight." Then she said to herself, "Okay, I'm supposed to be doing loving-kindness. May he be well and safe." And then he walked right up to her. He said, "Ma'am, I never do this, but you have such a kind face, and I'm facing a really difficult situation. I'd just like to ask if you would pray for me." And then he walked on.

So you don't know. You don't know what it does.

But it's said that as you cultivate loving-kindness, there's a whole set of blessings. Your dreams become sweet. You fall asleep more easily and wake contented. It's a beautiful practice. And angels and devas will love and protect you. And men and women will love you too, if you're interested. Weapons won't harm you and poisons won't work. If you lose things, they're always returned to you. It says—I don't know. People will welcome you everywhere and your thoughts become more pleasant. Animals will sense this and love you, and elephants will bow slightly as you go by. Your voice becomes sweeter and your babies are happy in the womb and growing up. If you fall off a cliff, a tree will always be there to catch you. And the world becomes filled with beautiful beings when you practice in this way.

So let's do a few minutes of metta, and then we'll do a little ritual to end the evening. Why don't you stand up and stretch for a moment? You've been sitting a long time.

And when you're ready, sit back down. Let your eyes close gently and come back just to feel your breath and body, just here on this amazing planet moving through the solar system and the galaxies. You get the whole Disneyland ride of a human incarnation. And the earth holds you as your mother.

Now as you sit quietly, let yourself think of, picture, remember someone who you love a lot, where it's relatively easy. Someone—or if there isn't a person, it could be your dog. Wherever there's a kind of natural love. Picture this being who you love, this person, likely. As you see them, feel your natural care for them and the kind of well-wishing.

With the simple phrases of loving-kindness, which are like planting seeds, you can say softly inside, as you see them: May you be held in great loving-kindness. May you be safe, safe and protected. May you be healthy and strong, or healed. And may you be happy.

Feel this beautiful well-wishing. How much you care for them.

May you be filled with loving-kindness. Safe and protected. Healed and strong. May you be happy.

And if we were doing this as a practice for a longer period, we would bring in other people you love—friends and family and community.

But now let yourself imagine that this loved one gazes back at you. They look back and see you with the same eyes of love that you were gazing upon them. And they wish the same thing for you. They care about you. They want you to be well. And they look at you and they say, "May you too be filled with loving kindness, especially toward yourself." And they say, "May you too be safe and protected." Take it in from them, this blessing. They look at you and they say, "May you be strong and healed and well." And they say, "May you be happy." They wish for you to be happy. May you be happy. Take it in from their gaze and their words.

And now, if you're comfortable with it, put a hand on your heart or your body, and receive the phrases they've offered—those well-wishings directed now to yourself. May I be filled with loving kindness, just as this loved one wants for you. May I be safe and protected. May I be strong and healed. And as they wish for you, may I be happy.

And as you feel the loving kindness in yourself, as you invite this, now imagine that you could spread it out from your heart, opening to all those seated in this room with you on our beautiful blue-green planet, dancing around our star, the sun. May all of you around be held in great loving kindness—safe and protected, healed and strong. And may you all be happy, truly happy. The joy for no reason. The well-being of life.

And finally, let it spread out from this room like a lighthouse or a beacon, out across the lands, in the waters of the bay, in the oceans, across the states and the continents and the whole world, to beings everywhere, far and near. Beings young and old. Beings human and non-human. Life. May all beings everywhere be held in great loving kindness. May all beings everywhere find safety and protection. May all beings everywhere be healed and strong. And may all beings everywhere find peace.

So that's, for those who haven't done it, a bit of loving kindness meditation. There are many ways you can learn it—books and downloads and so forth. And it's a beautiful practice to do and cultivate.

The last thing we're going to do this evening involves something to pass out among you all. What we're going to do—and it's of course totally voluntary—is to make what's called a blessing cord or a protection cord.

If you look across Buddhist Asia, all the way from Afghanistan through Southeast Asia and India and China and Japan, the thread or the cord is used as a symbol of the interconnectedness of all things, of interbeing. It's the sacred thread that weaves through all of life. And so you are woven in the thread of life and in the sacredness of life.

The reason it's this reddish color is that it's considered to be one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun. Basically, when you wear it, these are your robes, and you go into the marketplace—you're really a monk or a nun in drag, right? Your home is the temple, and you're visiting the marketplace.

Now, they're called blessing or protection cords. And one great Tibetan lama that I was doing this ritual with—we were both passing them out—somebody asked him, "Well, what exactly do they protect you from?"

And he said, "Well, yourself, of course," which is the main protection that people need.

So we're going to do a little ritual of creating the blessing cords. We have to tie three knots into them first.

The first knot, if you hold your cord up, is called the knot of refuge. In the Buddhist tradition, it would be to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—which is to say that you orient yourself toward that which is a basis for understanding. To take refuge in the Buddha means to see the Buddha in every being you meet. To take refuge in the Dharma is to follow what is true, or to follow the teachings that lead to truthfulness and awakening. And to take refuge in Sangha—Sangha means community—means recognizing that you can't do it alone, that every moment of awakening or kindness or love or compassion that you develop in yourself affects your family and your friends and community and how you drive and ripples out across the world. We are interconnected in our awakening.

But if Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is not the refuge that touches your heart, then you can take refuge in whatever is sacred or holy. So hold your cord and reflect on what is your deep refuge. To see the Buddha in every being you meet. To take refuge in that which is sacred. And when you're ready, tie a knot in the center of the cord that is your reminder and commitment to stay tuned to your refuge.

Now, holding your cord, the second knot is the knot of compassion. The vow of compassion is to refrain from causing harm to yourself and to others. You understand, the circle of compassion has to include yourself. Traditionally it means not to cause harm in word and deed, through your actions, to take care with how you speak and how you

act with others. Sometimes it's also the simplest principles of compassion: not to steal, to have reverence for life, to care for things, to not misuse the things of this world, to not misuse intoxicants, to not misuse sexuality but let it be an expression of awakening and of joy—to take care not to cause harm to yourself and others. This is the basis of compassion.

So reflect for a moment on what it means to live not causing harm to yourself and not causing harm to others. And when you're ready, tie the second knot into the cord, which is your commitment in this new year that starts in a day or so, the beginning of the returning of the light—to not cause harm to yourself, as best you can. You'll fail, of course, but then you get to start over again. These aren't commandments. These are practices, trainings.

And now the third knot. The third knot is the setting of an intention. The Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and he says, "May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for those to cross the flood. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be food for those who are hungry. May I be a lamp for those in the darkness. And may I carry this spirit until all beings are awakened together." However long that takes in the turning of the galaxies, may we all awaken together. This is my small dedication. Something like that—I will practice in this way.

I love the poem from my dear friend Diane Ackerman, where she writes: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon, and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

And so reflect for a moment: if you were to set an intention, it doesn't have to be quite so poetic or grand. Your intention could be as simple as, "I vow to be kind to myself and others." What intention, what turning of your heart in the direction of your own goodness and beauty, would you set as our Earth continues its beautiful turn around the sun again? This intention is a seed that grows within you.

And when you have your intention in mind and heart, tie the third knot in your cord, which is a reminder.

Your blessing or protection cord is now fully activated. Should you wish to wear it around your neck, even for a little while, place it there and let the two ends hang down. If you prefer to wear it around your wrist, wrap it a few times and let the two ends hang down. Then I'd invite you to turn to a person next to you and tie on their cord, offering them a silent blessing, and they will do the same for you.

I want to wish you all a beautiful holiday season. There will be no Monday class next week because it's Christmas Day. But this year we have a wonderful New Year's celebration with Wes Nisker, Nina Wise, Jennifer Bereson, and DJ Heartbeat. If you want a New Year's Eve party at Spirit Rock, eight in the evening to one in the morning—probably without the booze, but the rest of it will be pretty great. They're wonderful, and the music will be great, and I think the whole atmosphere will be special.

Lastly, I want to honor and recognize the many volunteers who help on Monday nights. Some of you have been helping for ten, twenty, or more years—people I have just come to love. In particular, I want to extend gratitude to Daniel Haggerty, a dedicated volunteer who has been helping make all the trails around Spirit Rock for you to walk on. He loves doing it, and it isn't easy—cutting trails, hiking trails, pretty intense labor, helping on Monday nights, doing all these things. Daniel, may you carry the blessings of this group and our metta and our healing energy so that you may be safe and well. Thank you for all your good work. And thank you also to the many other beautiful and dedicated volunteers who have been part of this.

So let's just meditate. Close your eyes for one last minute before you go out for the cookies. And that little smile—let that stay on your lips. Thich Nhat Hanh says that when you meditate, put a little half smile on your lips so that you sit with that quality of well-being in the midst of it all.

May you be safe and protected, everyone. Strong and healed. And may you live with a loving heart.

Thank you for your kind attention. It's just great to see you. Have a beautiful New Year. Take care with your families. You know, when Buddha and Jesus went home, they had trouble with their families too. So don't take it personally. That's why they call it the nuclear family—there's a reason for it. But it's okay. They're our people.

I'll see you in the New Year. Thank you.

CHAPTER 80

Nachiketa and the Lord of Death - How to Move Through Difficulties as a Transformative Initiation

Jack Kornfield · 1h01

> *In this evocative teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together the ancient story of Nachiketa from the Kaṭha Upaniṣads with Buddhist insights on mindfulness, loving awareness, and the transformative power of initiation. Nachiketa, a young man who refuses to accept hypocrisy and injustice, journeys to meet Lord Yama, the Lord of Death, and receives three boons: forgiveness to release the chains of the past, courage to live fully, and the wisdom to know what is immortal—realized through the mirror of self-inquiry.*
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> *Kornfield contextualizes this timeless myth within our current moment of cultural anxiety, exploring how difficulties—whether personal crises or collective challenges—can serve as initiations that strip away our limited identities and reveal our deeper nature as loving awareness itself. Drawing on his decades as a meditation teacher and psychologist, he illuminates how the instruction to 'die' to our resistance paradoxically brings liberation, and how facing death in any form opens us to rebirth.*
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> *The talk integrates poetry from Juan Ramón Jiménez, Mary Oliver, and Kabir alongside teachings from Nisargadatta Mahārāj, Thich Nhất Hạnh, and the Zen tradition. Kornfield also shares contemporary examples—from Parliament's mindfulness group to recent research on psychedelics and mystical experience—demonstrating how these ancient truths remain vitally relevant. The teaching invites practitioners to recognize that wherever the heart opens with love becomes sacred ground, and that we are already home.*

So again, thank you for coming out this evening, and I also want to say hello to those who couldn't sit in this room but are watching on screens upstairs in the East and West Hall. Come on in, even virtually, whatever you can. Happy to see you too. And those online.

When I come back to teach on Monday night, I try to reflect on what might be useful to us all together in the times that we live. Sometimes I focus very much on the practices of meditation and how to work with them, sometimes on the heart trainings of compassion and forgiveness. Tonight it's a different approach to understanding, but I think in it you might find some things that are valuable.

So let yourself listen, not in order to particularly remember. There's no quiz at the end. Just relax and let it be a meditation and see if something resonates for you that's true, that reminds you of something you already know that's of value. And if it's not, just let it go.

We were just sitting for half an hour or so practicing mindfulness, which I also like to translate as loving awareness—the quality of presence that combines knowing what's present with an open heart to receive with love or compassion this human life, this human experience. In that way, this form of meditation, because there are lots of good forms of meditation, but the form of meditation that's mindfulness is not oriented toward achieving a particular state or experience, but rather an invitation for a shift of perspective: to quiet ourselves, quiet the mind a little bit and listen, and to remember what matters to us or to remember who we really are.

The Christian mystic Simone Weil says, "The danger is not that the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but that by a lie it should persuade itself it is not hungry." She's really speaking to the way that we can lose ourselves in the busyness and complexity and demands and difficulties of life and somehow not have the time to stop and listen to what matters most deeply to us.

This becomes especially important because we're in a time of tremendous cultural anxiety. I could ask how many people in this room have experienced anxiety this last year, but don't bother raising your hand—you know. And an increase in addictions of all kinds, certainly the opioid crisis, but whether it's addiction to the internet or shopping or keeping ourselves busy or consuming, all those things. Not to speak of continuing war and racism and the environmental issues and destruction that are happening.

It's so important in some way to have a bigger picture, because otherwise we forget and we lose touch with the possibilities of the heart and the possibilities of living from a place of greater wisdom in the midst of these challenges.

We live in this human body, you get a human incarnation, and the best description of it is mystery. How did you get in there? How did you get into that body with little patches of fur in certain places, or you lose the fur, but anyway, then it grows in other places. My friend Wes Nisker, who teaches here, says the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard as you age.

But it's weird. I've talked about how there's a hole at one end of the body in which you stuff dead plants and animals and glug them down through the tube. And these weird eyeballs and ears that stick out—mine quite a bit. And you ambulate by falling one direction and catching yourself the other way. How did you get in there? And what are we going to do with it, this human life? It's mysterious.

The Buddhist texts begin, some of them, with the phrase: "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, of the Buddhas, remember who you really are."

This poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez, called "Yo no soy yo"—I Am Not I:

"I am not I.
I am this one walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit, and at other times I forget.
The one who remains silent when I talk,
the one who forgives sweet when I hate,
the one who takes a walk when I am indoors,
the one who will remain standing when I die."

He's really talking to us about some reality that's not just the small sense of self or limited identity, but that we are actually beings of spirit. When you were conceived or when you were born, there's a spirit that comes into this body that you get. And when you die, if you have the privilege of sitting with someone as they die, it's a remarkable thing, especially if it's a conscious death. There's that moment when they're alive and they're there. And then you can see or feel their consciousness, their spirit, leave the body. And then it's just stuff. It's not them anymore. It's wild.

And of course, the really wild thing is it's going to happen to you.

So when we sit, we take our seat in the middle of this human mystery of our life. And we learn somehow, with loving awareness, with mindfulness, to step out of the plot, the small sense of self, so we can bow to what arises—to our feelings and thoughts and sensations and stories. They all come, and we become the loving awareness, and so the heart grows in a kind of spaciousness or courage or compassion.

But it's not all that easy. "Oh, come and sit and breathe in and out and everything inviting ease and calm." Because as you get quieter, you get the unfinished business of the heart: the tears you haven't wept, the longing you carry, the fears or anxiety or restlessness that's in there, or the doubts about yourself or others. You also get waves of joy and delight. Some people are so loyal to their suffering they don't know what to do with all that good stuff—when it comes, it's unfamiliar to them.

And you discover, as Whitman says, "I am large, I contain multitudes." Little by little there comes a kind of trust that you can be with all the waves of experience that are your humanity and rest in the center of them with loving awareness, rest in a kind of openness. The trust grows.

But when it gets really bad—and I know this from leading many retreats here, where people will be sitting and walking on retreat as they do—

We have week-long and month-long, two-month retreats of silent practice. And then people get really restless or really bored or really frightened or whatever. The first instruction is to name it gently and make space for it, to bring compassion to whatever difficult experience arises. And then when it gets really, really bad, the instruction is: all right, you're so restless, let yourself be the first person to die of restlessness at Spirit Rock in 2018. Just say, "Okay, take me. I can't stand it."

And what happens when you're so bored or so restless or so frightened—whatever that difficult state is—when you say, "All right, take me," is that it gets easier. Because most of the difficulty is actually your resistance to the experience. When you say, "All right, I'll die of restlessness"—restless, restless, dying, dying, okay?—and then, of course, you think, "I wonder what they're going to have for dinner." Because the mind has no pride, right?

But you begin to realize that you have the capacity—because who you are is awareness—you have the capacity, you have within you the great heart of compassion and awareness itself to be present for this human life. Which means to be awake, and to do so in a way that's liberating.

Now, sometimes this happens in small ways. Little by little, we learn how to tolerate and be with things that are difficult moment to moment. And sometimes it comes through what I'm going to talk about more tonight, which is initiation. Using the language of initiation is a way of honoring and reframing the difficulties that you go through. How many of you have gone through a lot of difficulties? Don't raise your hands. But it's honoring the importance of the difficulties we go through.

So, initiation. You all know or probably have heard that traditional cultures particularly value and celebrate the power of initiation. For example, if you're a young man among the Maasai people in East Africa, to prove your manhood, you'll go out with a spear and kill a lion. Now there aren't so many lions left, unfortunately, but it's a way of facing some great danger and showing that you're ready to be included in the community—not as a child anymore, but as a man.

And there are initiations for women, not just menses and not just having children. I have a friend who lived for a long time with a group of people way up in the Guatemalan Mayan community, and over several years a woman went through their very deep initiation, which required all kinds of difficult things to become seen as a woman in that community.

I know when I was a monk in Thailand and Burma and so forth, it used to be that every young person in Thailand, either as a teenager or when they turned nineteen or twenty, would shave their heads—as a young man, or often as a young woman as a nun—and go spend a year in the temple. You were considered not ripe, like a green piece of fruit, until you had done that. And that year in the temple, yes, you would learn to make prayers and sit in meditation. But you'd also go out with your alms bowl and eat once a day whatever food was given to you. You'd have to learn to trust the world that you would have enough to eat. You'd have to sit up all night on new moon and full moon and quarter moon days and not move, sitting on the stone floor, just learning how to be with the pain and pleasure and fear and so forth. Somehow going through those difficulties was said to ripen the spirit of these young people so they were ready to go out and participate in society as an initiated person.

Of course, I'm sorry to tell you that what initiation most prepares you for is further initiation. But that's a whole other story.

Initiation in another language means that you have to go through a narrow place that's so difficult to get through you can't take your baggage with you. It strips you down in some difficult way.

The Zen teacher Karlfried Graf Dürckheim says, "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not as a consequence turn to those friends who offer them refuge and comfort and encourage the old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes himself over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the true spirit of awakening."

So this is initiation. Sometimes it's a calling that you feel, a spiritual calling or a longing. You have to do something, prove yourself, go through something difficult—a vision quest or a retreat or a sabbatical or a time out in nature. And often it comes to you unbidden. In these last days, I've been visiting some close friends who were in the hospital with some major difficulty—strokes and other kinds of things. It can also come collectively, as in our current cultural anxiety.

In Greek, it's called a *katabasis*, which means a blow, a crisis that comes. You're going along, toodling along with your life, and then all of a sudden something happens and your life changes. And it will happen, you know, just in case you hadn't noticed. It does happen to us as people.

And it requires you to step out of the ordinary way that you're moving along in your life and deepen and learn something new through that crisis or difficulty, individually or perhaps now for us collectively as a culture. In some way we're in the process of some deep cultural initiation, just as an individual might.

And so now I want to shift the language and talk in a more mythological or archetypal way. Because one of the things that seems to have happened in recent years culturally is that the Furies have been released. In ancient Greece, the Furies—they have various names—are spirits of vengeance and hatred. They appear when truth is not being honored, when oaths are not being kept, when the honorable respect that people have pledged their life to or devoted themselves to, in some collective or individual way, has been undermined and betrayed.

The thing about the Furies is that, in Greek mythology anyway, nothing can stop them—which is not very good news. That's how powerful they are, and we can see it in a certain way collectively. But then, as you read in the Greek myth, there was finally a resolution to the Furies that arose from the political and societal betrayals of ancient Greece. The goddess Athena invited them into her temple—the temple of wisdom—and made a place for them there. She said, "You too have a place here," and made an altar in their honor. Even the Furies that arise in us out of deep betrayal, out of vengeance and all those forces—if they can be held in the temple of wisdom, then we can all come together again. I leave that for you to reflect on what it could mean for us. Perhaps it will become clearer as I speak.

The mythological story I want to build on now, following this thread, is an ancient tale from the Katha Upanishad called the story of a young man named Nachiketa. Nachiketa came from a wealthy family in ancient India. He was part of the top one percent. He was privileged. And while he grew up enjoying life as a person with a great deal of privilege, he was also a young man, and as a teenager and as he grew older, he saw the poverty around him. It wasn't that everything was fine—there was a tremendous amount of injustice and hypocrisy and racism, there was the caste system, and all manner of things. People not only lived well as he did, but in many cases lived well off of the work and exploitation of others. And young people look around and say, "Wait a second, what kind of world is this?" So he saw both injustice and hypocrisy.

His father, who had become an old man, started to grow ill. He became worried and frightened about death, and particularly about what would happen to his mortal soul. In India at that time, in the Upanishads, the teachings were of rebirth and what your next birth would be. The father became really worried, partly perhaps because he reflected on the way he had lived. So he talked to some of his wealthy friends and colleagues, who steered him to the Brahmin priests who ran the great temple in the community. They suggested that if he made a magnificent offering, divesting himself of much of what he owned and giving it to the temple and the priests—a huge donation—that would assure him a very fine rebirth. This has been tried on many continents, in many traditions. Some would call it indulgences. But anyway, he was terrified, and the priests said, "This will do it."

So he created a public event, a huge parade. He wanted a parade—we won't talk about that. At the culmination of it, he came to the gates of the temple and said, "I give my cattle"—there were oxen and gold—"I give all I value to the priests of this temple," in public, in a great display. His son, his only son, was standing there, and it struck him as hypocritical, a bit of a sham. It didn't have the feeling of genuine spirituality.

The father said again, "I give all I value to the temple." And the son said, "What about me, your son? Don't you value me?" He said it in a way that was an affront to his father, in the middle of the public square during this great celebration. His father was overcome with anger at being shamed by his son. "You," he said, "I give you to death." That was his response—an angry father, mortified.

But you know how young people are. William Faulkner wrote, "Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor. Not for kudos, not for cash, not for your picture in the paper, not inheritance or money in the bank. Just refuse to bear them." And this young man said, "I'm not going to bear it. I will not go along with this sham."

"I give you to death," said his father.

And the young man said, "I accept." And he walked away.

So Nachiketa decided to seek Lord Yama.

Lord Yama is the lord of death, who presides over the underworld. And Nachiketa went deep into the forest, took a seat, and said, "I will not get up until I see death." And he waited and waited for many days without moving. He sat through pain and hunger and difficulty.

The poet Kabir wrote, "I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days." And you find it in meditation. Some of the temples that I trained in, not only would we sit and walk, but they said when you want to master a posture, then sit for twenty-four hours and don't move—or stand, as I did. Don't move until you feel the pain, the fire, the doubt, the fear, all of that, until you can just remain steady no matter what happens.

So here's Nachiketa sitting through pain and hunger and fear out in the forest for three days and nights without moving. And somehow he knew that he had to face death. All over the place, from popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume. And in some way, he said, "I'm just going to opt out of the system. I am not going to do it."

He knew somehow that something had to die to do this. The way he'd been with his father, who he was in the community—he knew there was something bigger than the identity that had been given to him.

I've learned something very interesting as a psychologist and teacher over the years. When people are considering suicide or are suicidal, very often they're right about wanting to die, but there's one little basic confusion they make: they think it's their body that has to die, when in fact something does have to die. It might be the role they've taken, or the job they have, or the identity they have, or the fact that they haven't come out of whatever closet they're hiding in. It might be the marriage that doesn't work that has to die. Something has to go, but they think it's their body, when actually it's the death of something that will allow them to become bigger. Does this make sense to you? And that's really important to honor.

So it's not about the body. And Nachiketa understood this. Somehow, there comes in us through our practice, our meditation, our initiations, a kind of trust that if we can face death in some fashion, it will actually be a benefit.

Carl Sagan, the great scientist and cosmologist, after surviving a near fatal illness, said, "I recommend almost dying to everyone. It's character building. You get a much clearer perspective of what's important and what isn't, the preciousness and beauty of life."

We sense that in some way. I remember my friend Michelle McDonald, who's a colleague and teacher. She was also a preschool teacher, and she was teaching these five-year-olds. She said, "Let's study death." Little kids know about death, and they were interested in their own way. "Go out in the forest and collect dead things," she told them.

They came back from the trees with dead leaves and dead sticks, and somebody found part of a skeleton of a mouse or a lizard. They made a whole pile of dead things and began to talk about what death is, why things die, whether death is okay.

Then she said, "Well, what would happen if there wasn't death?" And one of the little kids said, "Well, then there'd be more and more trees and more and more things, and there'd be no room for us, for all the new ones coming in. Without death, things would get very crowded."

We start to trust, if we look deeply, that we're part of some cycle. And in some way, every day—what did Dylan say? "He who's not busy being born is busy dying." We're always dying and being reborn in new ways, and we can begin to trust this.

There's a new book by Michael Pollan, who wrote *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and all kinds of other bestsellers, entitled *How to Change Your Mind*, on psychedelics, depression, addiction, dying, and consciousness. It's a wonderful book in which he details the new research on psilocybin and psychedelics being done at Johns Hopkins Medical School, NYU, UCLA, and places like that.

I did talk to Michael quite a bit, for some hours, during the course of his research for the book. But then I was in Hawaii when one of the key researchers at Johns Hopkins, a famous and respected psychopharmacologist and professor at the medical school named Roland Griffith, was visiting Ram Dass for the first time and describing the research he'd done with cancer patients and people dying and with those who were addicted to various things.

The main thing he communicated to Ram Dass, who loved it and smiled, was that if people take this substance with blindfolds and music and really go in and experience a very deep shift in consciousness, often they're released from their addictions or released from their fears of dying. He said, "The one scale that's most accurate in measuring what will be effective from this is a scale we use called the human mystical experience. If people have a mystical experience, then they change in really deep and radical ways." And from the work they're doing with psilocybin, that was the case in eighty percent of the people.

A mystical experience can also happen through unceasing prayer, or going on a retreat, or going into the high mountains, or making love. It can happen in childbirth or sitting with someone who's dying. There are all kinds of ways to be close to the mystery. But through this research work, if people have a mystical experience—and I'll leave that for you to define for yourself, really stepping out of their normal, small sense of self—then addictions drop away, difficulties change, depression lifts.

Interesting, isn't it? You can, if you're interested, read more about this in Michael Pollan's book.

So here we have to get back to Nachiketa. Nachiketa is sitting there in the forest, not moving for three days and nights—his initiation—waiting for death. And all of a sudden, he finds himself in the kingdom of death. He said, "Where is Lord Yama? I've come to see him." And they said, "Lord Yama is out collecting rent. The only ones of us who are here are War, Pestilence, and Famine. Can we help you?" And Nachiketa said, "Nope, I will wait further."

He waited, and finally Lord Yama arrived back. His assistants War, Pestilence, and Famine said, "We have a very unusual young man here. Normally people run the other way when they hear you're coming, Lord Yama. But he sat for three days and nights and said he wouldn't move until he got an audience with the Lord of Death." So Lord Yama sat down with him and gazed at him and said, "You are indeed an unusual young man. What brings you?"

Nachiketa told his story and said, "I will not live with hypocrisy and injustice. I cannot do that. My father said, 'I give you to death.' And I said, 'Then I will go.'" Listening to this young man, Lord Yama felt this was indeed a courageous being—someone with a great spiritual heart. He said, "Because I have kept you waiting for three days, I will give you three boons." That is, three wishes. We're in mythological territory now. You know how these stories go—you get three wishes. "I will give you three boons, and you can ask for that which you wish."

So Nachiketa sat quietly. He tried to feel inside: What is it that one needs in this kind of journey to really transform and free oneself? The first boon he asked for was the boon of forgiveness. He said, "May I be forgiven. May my father see me with the eyes he had when I was first born as his son. May all that I have done that has caused pain to others be forgiven. May I forgive myself."

Everyone in this room has been disappointed. Everyone in this room has been betrayed and hurt. It's part of the human dance. And not only that—everybody in this room has hurt somebody else and betrayed someone else, or abandoned them, or disappointed them. The forgiveness that Nachiketa asked for releases the chains of the heart, because without it, we are chained to the past. Whether you have the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda, or the Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, or the Palestinians and the Israelis, or the Bosnians and the Serbs and the Croats—they all say, "Well, your people did it to my people last year, a hundred years ago, five hundred years ago. We're never going to forget." They're chained to the past and they're not free. Nachiketa understood this. He said, "May I be granted forgiveness"—the first of the boons.

A story to read to you. Among the Babemba people of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things that person in the center has done in their lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy is recounted. All their positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This communal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the community.

I read about this and I think about our prison system—the millions of people who are incarcerated or part of the parole system, millions and millions—and I think: What would it be if we had a society that could see the goodness in someone rather than

the incarceration and punishment. Our prisons have also become the default mental hospitals. I mean, what kind of society is this?

In Hawaii, on the Kona coast of the big island, there's a temple called Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau, the Temple of Refuge. In Hawaiian culture, no matter what you had done—if you had broken the worst taboo or kapu—if you could get yourself into that temple, you would be forgiven. It's right on the ocean, a kind of wild place. And I went in there and thought, "Okay, I hope this place works. I'm here." But imagine if we could do this in our culture.

So Nachiketa asked for this blessing. But I told you there was a coda to this story. I read it at one point and a good friend of mine who grew up in Zimbabwe, who speaks Shona and some of the Babemba tongue, said, "You know, I've lived with Babemba people. I've never seen this." He said, "I think this is an artifact of the internet—someone created this. But I have a couple of really good friends who are Babemba elders and shamans. So I'm going to send it to them. And if they don't do it, maybe they can try it out and I'll let you know how it goes." This is how it all works in the world these days.

So that was Nachiketa's first boon.

Now, the second boon. He asks for courage. Remember, this is a young man—or it could be a young woman. He says, "May I be granted that inner fire, the courage to live my life fully, to truly be alive." Because when we are, all kinds of things become possible—things we don't even know are possible. Thomas Jefferson said, "One person with

courage is a majority." And I had on my refrigerator for a long time a picture of that Chinese man with a shopping bag standing in front of a line of tanks near Tiananmen Square. One person with courage is a majority.

And so when you sit, when you do your spiritual practice, it's not so much to get some experience, but to awaken your capacity to be truly alive and present.

I think of my teacher Dipa Ma, one of the greatest masters of the last number of generations. She began her meditation practice after a series of tragedies in which two of her three children died and then her husband died. She had one child left. She became paralyzed and lay in bed for about a year, unable to move from depression and illness. And then she more or less crawled up the stairs of the temple and said, "I need to find something, and this is my last gasp. I will do whatever you tell me." She became this extraordinary teacher and meditator, partly because what was left in her—yes, there was desperation, if you will—but also there was a kind of courage. She said, "I have to do this. I have to find some way to deal with the suffering of this human life. And I know that there's something more."

In recent traveling, Trudy, my beloved wife and teaching partner, and I were teaching in Europe. We were in France and also in England. We did some teaching for the Oxford Mindfulness Center, and then we got to go teach in Parliament, which was very cool. We got taken around Parliament. And it turns out that there is a Parliament mindfulness group with eighty-five members. They have one of their many reports called "Mindful UK." They have built into the UK national healthcare system and into the education system—they are passing laws that require teaching of mindfulness and social and emotional skills and compassion in healthcare and in education.

So we got taken around, and first we visited the House of Commons. There was the Home Minister, and they were grilling him just like you see in those BBC broadcasts. It was fun to watch all the rough and tumble in the questions. Then we went to the House of Lords, and there were even a few people with those curly wigs. It was a little more civil discourse, but nevertheless, there was a lot of concern about things. And then we met with about twenty of them.

First we sat in meditation together, and I guided some practices. Then they talked, and they said, "You know, we sit every week, and this is one of the best things that happens to us all week. We sit together, we quiet ourselves." And there were people from both sides of the aisle. They said, "We meditate, we quiet ourselves, and then we can really listen to each other in a way that we don't down there at all. We love it."

They asked me to speak, and we'd been shown around Parliament—the history there is remarkable. Here's where the Magna Carta came in, here's where poor Thomas More lost his head, here's Winston Churchill's bust. And now they're facing Brexit, this great dilemma. We talked about courage, and what it meant that the whole of that history, in a certain way—the best of it—was the history of courage. What did it mean to carry courage in a difficult time? It was a beautiful conversation.

What was clear in it is that it's never too late to start. Wherever you are, even if things are very difficult, when you center and quiet yourself and really look in your heart at what matters, you can direct yourself in a way that—no matter how it turns out—you don't have regrets. You really live the life that matters to you. That's what was there, and it was quite wonderful.

This is what Nachiketa asked for. He asked for courage to live fully, to be present.

Now, getting near the end here, Lord Yama says, "Well, you've had your two boons. There's a third one for you. What would you ask?"

Nachiketa sat for a little while, and he said, "I ask for that which is immortal, which is undying."

Lord Yama sat back. "Really? You could ask for anything." And by the magic of his own powers, he showed him a palace. "You could have a royal chariot, golden, with magnificent steeds. You could have consorts, you could have"—and he just showed him, you know, the Ferrari, basically, and all the possibilities. "You could have anything. Think it over. This is your last wish. What would be great for you?"

Nachiketa, being a very wise young man, considered carefully. He looked back at the Lord of Death and said, "Tell me, Yama—will not all these things you've shown me soon enough return to your kingdom?"

Yama said, "Well, yes. You have a point there. Yes, in fact, they're all temporal."

Nachiketa said, "Then for my third boon, I request to come to know that which is beyond death."

Lord Yama said, "Then I have a gift for you." He went and returned with the gift, and he placed into Nachiketa's hand a beautiful, slightly ornate mirror. He said, "You must look into this mirror and ask one question: Who am I? Who am I?"

This is the great spiritual question that many masters have posed. I remember at the end of one of our three-month retreats on the East Coast—we have a two-month winter retreat here, but there we would invite different teachers to come in and sit with people after they'd been silent for three months, meditating, with some teachings. Very open.

This great Korean Zen master, Kusan Sunim, from Nine Mountains Monastery, came in. We told him the retreatants had been practicing hard, training themselves. We described it. He got down and he said, "Oh, your practice—no good. Not really." Three months, and they didn't feel very good about that. But then he said, "Oh, mindfulness—nah." He said only one thing. He took out his Zen stick and banged it on the floor and shouted, "What is this? What is this?" And he kept shouting, "What is this?"

This life, this body—what am I? What is this? This question you must answer.

It was a beautiful Zen moment. Left them all shaking. But this is the question. Really, who are you?

There's an interesting way to understand this. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged. Starts to wrinkle and sag and lose its fur, puff out in certain ways and get skinnier—bodies do all the weird things that bodies do. They age. But the thing that's odd is that you don't necessarily feel older. Almost everybody has this experience. And that's because in that moment you can see your body at a little distance.

The body ages—it's in time. It's a little infant and a little child and teenager and a young adult, and then it gets older and so forth, eventually dies. But the consciousness that's observing the body is outside of time. It's looking and saying, "Hmm, lost its fur. Seventy-three years old, getting older." You see it from the perspective of consciousness itself, which is timeless. "Oh, how's this incarnation going for you?"

You're able to step back in that moment, if you take a pause with it, and realize that there's a difference between the normal identity of who you take yourself to be and that mysterious thing that doesn't feel older—because it's not. Conscious awareness doesn't age. You are a spirit or consciousness that was born into this body and that will leave it. You are not—I don't know—Big Macs and kale, or whatever it is you eat. It's just not who you are. And you're not your emotions, even though they're very dramatic and we appreciate them—but they pass. And Lord help us, you're not your thoughts.

So what are you? You are loving awareness itself. You are consciousness.

What Nachiketa learned by looking in the mirror given to him by Lord Yama is that who he was is undying spirit. That's the reality. That's who you are as well. And you'll see when you die. You float out of your body and there's light and you go, "Wow, wasn't that an incarnation? Wonder what's next." You wait. I don't know. You don't have to believe it. Check it out later. See what happens.

But what happens when you allow yourself to see your life as a series of initiations, large and small, is that more and more you trust rebirth itself. Like the great chemist Lavoisier, who said, "Everything changes and nothing is lost." When you do chemistry and the equations, the molecules on one side all go into a new compound, but nothing is lost. And it's a spiritual truth as well.

You begin to trust rebirth—both personally, that you go through hard things, you lose things that you love, people that you care about, the way things were. And it seems like it's the end of the story. It's not the end of the story. It is part of this cycle of birth and death that happens all the time. Every day you're born every morning, new at breakfast. You might as well admit it. All right, what are you going to do with this day?

And it's both personal and collective. Even now, in times of cultural anxiety and some very painful things happening—especially to large numbers of the most vulnerable in the community and in the world—things that we want to do about it and need to respond to, it's also possible that something, some other energy... It's not possible—it's inevitable that something new will be born. We don't know what it is. Our job is to tend and plant the seeds and bring our trust and allow something new to happen.

But for Nachiketa—this is Thich Nhat Hanh writing—he says: "This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I am life without boundaries."

I've never been born and never died. Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars, manifestations from the wondrous true mind, from consciousness itself. Since before time I have been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again tomorrow. We meet at the source of every moment. We meet in all forms of life where this is what we are.

Now it's poetry, but it's also possibly true.

"Who are you?" said Lord Yama. Look in the mirror and see.

And my teacher Nisargadatta, the great Indian sage, said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing. Love sees that I am everything. Between these two, my life flows."

And this is what Nachiketa understood. He said, I am nothing. You die in some ways, the old, and something new is reborn. I am nothing and I am everything. And his heart became free—free to love, free with forgiveness, free with courage, free to remember that he was spirit and not limited by his body or his history. Those things all affect us, but they're not the end of the story, any more than Nelson Mandela walking out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island prison with so much magnanimity and graciousness and forgiveness and compassion. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit. They can put your body in the hospital, but no one can imprison your spirit.

So Nachiketa found this freedom and this trust that he could let go and die and be reborn, as we do, that things will renew themselves. And then he realized that he was already home—that what he sought, he had found.

But then the question arises: how does he get back? How does he return from the underworld? And you think about the myth of Persephone coming from the underworld to bring spring again after the winter darkness.

What happened as Nachiketa stood there was this: he realized that wherever you love is the sacred ground, is the holy ground, is the promised land. And his heart had opened. Wisdom says, I am nothing. And love says, I am everything. He was filled with love for his family, his community, for all that was alive. He knew that was himself. And he opened his eyes again, and there he was, back in the forest grove, ready to walk into town.

In the Zen teachings, they show this picture of going into the forest to tame the wild ox. And the last of the ten pictures of ox herding shows this old man entering the town with a wine bottle and a staff. He says, "I enter the marketplace and all who I look upon, I offer blessings, and they all become awakened."

And even as a young man, Nachiketa returned—but he returned in a very different way, because he had faced his own death, his own fears. He had learned forgiveness. He had learned a kind of courage that couldn't be taken from him.

And then the world became beautiful.

This is Mary Oliver, our modern great poet, our modern Rumi:

What can I say that I've not said before? So I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there's an unfinished story and you are somewhere in it, and it will never end until it all ends. Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce, but take it also to the forest. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still.

I'm seventy-four years now, and the leaf is singing still.

And somehow Nachiketa, having descended to the land of death, was reborn. And everything he looked upon had the shining blessing of an open heart and a deep courage.

And we see it.

I guess the last thing I'll say is this: when people go on retreat—a week or ten days or a month or two here—they usually come in pretty tired, sometimes haggard. They work really hard to get the time off, so by the time they arrive, they're especially tired. They settle down in the first few days; it takes a little while for their body to quiet and their mind to begin to settle. But when you see them at the end of ten days or however long they've lived in retreat, they look a lot younger. We call it the Vipassana facelift. Their eyes are shining, their skin looks different, and they walk more slowly. There's a flowering.

I remember this guy, this big tattooed ex-Marine. And he's looking at the flowers, cupping them in his hands and smelling them. And it works, you know. The initiation of being with yourself works. Going off on retreat or into the mountains or a place where you can really let yourself tend to your heart—and then you come back renewed. That's the blessing.

And then to have a practice that you can remind yourself in this way, even as you sit in the morning or the evening or walk—all of that is an invitation to live in a different way.

So let's sit for a moment. Forgiveness, courage, and the mystery that you are loving awareness itself, born into this body.

Thank you for listening to the bedtime story. And whatever was of value or sweet reminder for you, carry that perfume from the temple back out into the marketplace.

Good night.

CHAPTER 81

Respect - The Beauty That Grows from Respect for All

Jack Kornfield · 1h08

> *In this profound teaching, Jack Kornfield illuminates respect as a cornerstone of Buddhist practice and human flourishing. Through the Arthurian legend of Sir Gawain and the Hag of Bera, he reveals that what all beings truly desire is sovereignty—the loving respect to be honored for who they are. This teaching echoes the Buddhist texts that begin with "O nobly born," reminding us not to forget our true nature and basic goodness.*
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> *Kornfield draws from his training with Ajahn Chah in the Thai forest tradition, where respect permeated every aspect of monastic life—from sweeping paths to folding robes to bowing to one another. He explores how mindfulness itself is an act of respect: paying attention to our bodies, feelings, and minds with loving awareness rather than judgment. Through stories ranging from John Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction clinic to conflict resolution at Facebook to peace-building in Colombia, he demonstrates how respect transforms relationships and even prevents violence.*
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> *The talk addresses how we often project our unacknowledged pain onto others, citing James Baldwin's insight that people cling to hate because they sense that once it's gone, they'll face their own suffering. Kornfield invites us to honor our measure of tears and sorrows alongside our gifts, expanding our sense of self to include all beings. He shares moving examples from prison work, Parliament meditation sessions, and climate negotiations to show how respect can heal communities and change the world. The teaching concludes with a reminder that we are blessed by everything we look upon with loving awareness.*

So please let yourself settle in your place. Find a way to sit comfortably.

And welcome back to the people who are watching online or on Facebook Live. Thank you for joining us. People who are upstairs. And to the deer and the foxes and badgers and so forth that are also listening out there. You don't know—there are all these Zen stories about the foxes and the deer listening.

As I talk tonight or teach, let yourself listen as a kind of meditation practice itself. Not so much listening in order to remember it all. There's no quiz, no grades. But listening somehow to notice if anything resonates as true in you. Because at its best, I believe, teaching is to be reminders of things that we already know in our own heart. And if it's not a reminder, if it doesn't seem true, just let it go. But let yourself be easy as you listen.

Last month I did a talk that was a great myth, a story from India on the story of Nachiketa and the Lord of Death. And I feel like I wanted to do some stories in these talks in these months. So tonight we have a different story. And again, I ask indulgence of those who've heard some of these stories before. Think of them as bedtime stories. "Oh, can I hear that one again?"

So the theme tonight that I'd like to talk about, which is so central to the practice of awakening or the liberation of the heart, is respect. Now, I suppose we should turn on Aretha right now. That would be the way to start properly and to honor her and her gift to us.

The Buddhist texts, a number of them, begin with this phrase: "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas, do not forget who you really are. Do not forget your true nature." They begin with this beautiful expression of respect to you—that you were born with a basic goodness and a heart of compassion that is born into every child. And you were born with the capacity to awaken and live in a wise and caring way in this world. Do not forget who you really are.

And then it goes deeper than that, as you will see in this talk. Who are you really, it asks? Who got born into this human incarnation? What is that spirit that came into this body?

So the story that I would tell now is an Arthurian legend about Sir Gawain, who was one of the great knights of the Arthurian round table. Sir Gawain was traveling through Arthur's kingdom in the countryside when he went through a very thick and dark forest, which there used to be a great deal of in England.

As a little aside, now that I think of it, I had the privilege of teaching at Oxford University a couple of months ago at the Oxford Mindfulness Center. I spent some time there, and my guide said, "Would you like the full Hogwarts experience?" Because that's where Harry Potter was filmed, and there are these fantastic old Gothic cathedrals and dining halls and so forth, which we did go to.

It happens to connect us to the forest in Sir Gawain's story. A couple of decades ago, in one of the oldest colleges at Oxford, which was built in the 1600s, the great beams that held up the ceilings in the dining hall started to get dry rot after 400 years. The custodians and caretakers of Oxford became concerned. You don't get five-foot-wide beams anymore at the hardware store, those enormous old-growth trees. They were worried—what will we do? Maybe we'll get laminate.

And then somebody said, "Well, why don't you talk to the college foresters?" It turns out that Oxford has a whole private forest somewhere in England. And those who built those ancient halls said, "You know, someday those beams will get dry rot." So 400 years ago, or 450 years ago, they planted a stand of trees which were waiting for someone to say, "Now is the time." This is the way to run a culture, by the way—to think a little bit in advance.

So those are the forests that Sir Gawain got lost in, with these enormous trees and vines and creepers and the wilderness of England. And night fell. He couldn't get out. There were brambles, and he was really stuck.

And he tried with his great horse and he couldn't. As he struggled through the forest, he came upon a clearing. There was a bit of moonlight coming through the clouds, and there was a beautiful well. He thought, well, at least I can rest here and quench my thirst. He drew the bucket up from the well and drank. Quenched his thirst and made a place to rest.

As he started to rest there, the moon came out, and then he heard the sounds of the hooves of a horse approaching. He got startled in the middle of this forest. How could that be? And then he saw this great stallion approach, and on it was a woman with very long hair and a cloak. He thought, well, this is interesting.

She arrived and turned to him. She had a bit of a beard and only a couple of teeth. Her skin was all wrinkled, and one eye was hanging out in one direction. She had a number of different names at that time. The Hag of Bera is one of the names for her. Kali is her name in India. Baba Yaga is her name in Russia. She is the woman who makes the world, who creates all things. She's seen in every culture—she's the Great Old One.

She got down, wearing this beautiful cloak, and she said, "You drank from my well."

He said, "Oh, I'm sorry."

She said, "Is that all a great knight has to say? Can't you do better than that?"

He said, "Madam, if I've offended you in any way, I will do whatever I can as a knight to make up for this."

She said, "Well, I thank you for that promise. Actually, there is something that you can do to make up for this."

He said, "Whatever you wish."

She said, "Yes, I'm finding myself to be rather lonely, and so I would like to get married."

He gulped. But he had promised, and a knight makes a promise and must keep it.

She said, "Yes, I would like a wedding, and I would like a big wedding at Arthur's Castle where we invite everyone."

He said, "Couldn't we have like a little private—"

She said, "No, no, we have to do this right."

He said, "Well, I need a little time to think about it."

She could see his reservations—one could well understand. He said, "Isn't there anything else I could do for you?"

To which she replied, "Well, there is one thing. If you can answer a question, and return here in one year with the correct answer, then I will absolve you of the wish to be married."

He said, "Certainly, what is the question?"

She looked at him and said, "What is it that women want?"

He took a breath. "All right, I'll work on it."

She got back on her horse and went out through the dark of the forest, and there he was.

The next day or two, he found his way out of the forest in the light and met with King Arthur and the other knights and told them what had happened. "I have to answer this question," he said. He got a great big book—those old kind, leather bound—and went with his minions around the country interviewing women, asking them what they wanted. Some wanted wealth, some wanted many children, some wanted love, some wanted a nice piece of land—all kinds of answers, and he wrote them all down.

By the end of the year he'd filled the volume. He packed it on his steed and went back to the middle of that forest and sat by the well. The moon rose again, and sure enough, he heard the horse come, and there descended the beautiful cloaked hag.

She said, "Well, have you got an answer?"

He handed her the book. "I have a hundred answers. I have five hundred answers."

She flipped through it in the moonlight. "No, no, no, no." She said, "I'm sorry, you don't have the answer. When shall we have the wedding?"

He said, "Well, can we postpone it a little?"

She said, "How about next week?"

He said, "Two weeks at least. We'll get it together."

So he went back. And being the knight that he was, he had agreed and arranged for a wedding to take place. There was the feast, the wine, the music—all the things that happened in Arthur's court for a wedding. And then it was done.

They retired to the bridal chamber. And there they are in the bridal chamber, Sir Gawain with his new bride. She's seated on the side of the bed and she says, "Aren't you going to kiss the bride?"

He hesitated, as you could understand. And she looked at him and said, "You are a brave knight after all, are you not?"

He took a breath and leaned over and gave her a kiss. And immediately she turned into a glorious and glamorous young woman who had been a princess, as in all these stories. So that was a good move on his part.

And he said, "Oh, I'm so glad we're married now."

And she said, "Yes, but there is one problem. Your kiss has released me from a spell that I have been under. And now, with this spell, I am half free. Which is to say that I can be in this beautiful form for half the time—at night with you in our bedchamber—but then in the daytime, I resume the form of the hag. Or, if you wish, I can be beautiful on your arm for the day with you, and at nighttime, I turn into the hag. Which would you choose?"

A little dilemma for Sir Gawain. He spent some time meditating. He'd been to Spirit Rock. He knew that this was not a time to make a rash decision. And when he got quiet and listened deeply and looked at her—now beautiful in front of him—and felt the love that was a bond that was growing, he looked at her and said, "I cannot choose, and I will place it in your hands. What would you choose?"

And her eyes lit up and she said, "Now you have broken the whole spell. Because the answer to the question that I asked you has now been revealed from your own lips. And what it is that women want is their own sovereignty—to not have someone else say, 'You must do this and you must be that,' and 'You should' and 'You shouldn't,' but to be honored in their own right for who they are."

And then—I won't go into details—but they had a wonderful wedding night and quite a good marriage following that.

This word *sovereignty* is an interesting word. Because it means respect. It means a loving respect for oneself, for others, for those around us. And in some way, it means that we operate from the place of our nobility, from our Buddha nature—that you are the king or the queen of your own realm.

And it's interesting, because people would come to the Buddha, in the stories that are told anyway, and they would ask him for teachings. He would give them teachings—sometimes very demanding teachings, and sometimes beautiful, loving teachings, depending on the circumstance. And at the end, he would look at people as they were digesting and hearing the teachings, and he would say, to conclude, "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." It's a famous phrase in the Buddhist texts, which is to say: all right, I've given you the best advice that I can, I've illuminated what I can, and now I place it in your heart, in your hands. It's time for you to do as you see fit. And that gesture was one, again, of respect and sovereignty—that you are the one who determines your own life and your own heart.

Every being loves respect. Your employers and your employees. Children, adults, elders. Your garden loves respect—you'll notice it when you treat it that way.

It's like the seven-year-old boy who went out with his mother and father to a restaurant. The waitress came and took their orders, and then she said to the little boy, "What will you have?"

And the mother answered before the boy could speak: "He'll have the meatloaf, the mashed potatoes, and a glass of milk."

And he said, "Well, really, I'd rather have the hot dog and fries."

And his mother said, "No, he'll have the meatloaf, the mashed potatoes, and the milk."

The waitress took the other orders, and then when she left, she turned to him and said, "Would you like ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?"

And as she walked away, the little boy turned to his parents and said, "She thinks I'm real."

Everyone loves respect.

When I lived in the forest monastery of my teacher Ajahn Chah, the whole community was built around a kind of respect. The paths were swept in this beautiful, respectful way in the forest, and we learned ways to fold our robes and care for our bowls and to bow to one another in ways that offered our respect, and to receive people's respect. It was a field of respect that allowed us to be present for one another in a beautiful way.

The natural world loves our respect. Quails and ants and rabbits and owls. I have this beautiful poem calligraphied by Lloyd Reynolds, who was the teacher of Steve Jobs, the greatest American calligrapher. He wrote: "A bug crawls over the paper. Leave him be. We need all the readers we can get." The little bugs also want your respect.

And there was a beautiful painting—it came from a photograph—and my daughter, in her artist mode, did a painting that was for sale for a long time in the bookstore. I don't know if it's still there. It was of the moment when the Dalai Lama and Maha Ghosananda, who is the Gandhi of Cambodia, met each other here. They were old friends.

And by the upper retreat hall when the Dalai Lama was visiting, they each bowed, and they each tried to bow lower than the other one, and finally they got kind of parallel and their heads bumped as they were close to the earth. They were just each offering one another respect.

So, a story I've read many times from the New Yorker: A small unit of American soldiers was walking through the holy city of Najaf in the early years of the Iraq War when hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side, fists waving, throats taut. They pressed in on the fifteen Americans, who glanced at one another in terror. The author, a reporter, said, "I was afraid a shot would come from somewhere, the Americans would open fire, it would turn into a massacre."

At that moment, the American officer stepped through the crowd, holding his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground. Against the backdrop of the seething crowd, now almost a thousand, it was a striking gesture, almost biblical. "Take a knee," the officer said behind his sunglasses. The soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy, and then one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the boiling crowd and pointed their guns at the ground. The Iraqis fell silent and their anger subsided. The officer ordered his men to withdraw.

It took me months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes to ask him about this. When I asked how he had learned to tame a crowd in a war zone in a distant country, he assured me that it was not part of the army manual of instruction. He said, "The problem with warning shots is the next thing you know, people start shooting for real." And anyway, he said, the Iraqis felt that the Americans were disrespecting their mosque and their culture in this holy city. The obvious solution to Colonel Hughes was a gesture of respect. It saved all those lives.

The breathtaking freedom and beauty of mindfulness is that we can acknowledge what's so. We can bow to it, as you just did. You can name it with loving awareness and see, "This is the way that it is." And experience whatever it is, pleasant or painful, with a gesture of respect. Say, "This too."

So I was riding with my teacher Ajahn Chah on the way to a monastery. We'd been invited to a temple on the Cambodian border, and a young guy in a pickup truck gave us a ride. He liked to speed, as young men do. The problem was it was a one-and-a-half-lane dirt road through the mountains—mostly empty, but once in a while there'd be a bus or a logging truck or a water buffalo—and he was just zipping around the corners. I started to hold on, thinking, "Okay, I'm going to die in this one," because there was a drop-off and you couldn't see what was coming. Then I looked over and I saw that my teacher's knuckles were white too, and that somehow reassured me. I don't know why.

Finally we made it and pulled into the courtyard of this little monastery, and Ajahn Chah turned to me and said, "Scary ride, wasn't it?" It wasn't like he wasn't supposed to be scared. It was like Disneyland: "That was a scary ride." He bowed to it and just said, "Yeah, that's a scary ride." Things are the way they are. We take our seat in meditation halfway between heaven and earth and offer our respect to the way that life is. And then we can respond. We see it with a kind of beginner's mind, to see it with respect. And it brings a wonderful freedom.

We become aware of this body, this mysterious body that you somehow got into. You don't know how you got a human incarnation, but you did. And you've got to deal with it. You're the steward of it. To pay attention to it is neither to be clinging and obsessed with it, nor to ignore it.

Remember the poem from Eduardo Galeano? He writes: "The church says the body is a sin. Science says the body is a machine. The marketplace says the body is good business. The body says, I am a fiesta."

We can pay attention to this body in many, many different ways. And with loving awareness, we become curious. What is it that this body wants to tell us, to teach us? What do we learn? How do we steward it and care for it? This all comes out of mindfulness. Mindful eating: Is this the thing that the body actually wants and needs at this point?

Not making it a grim duty, but actually listening. Meditation isn't supposed to be a grim duty. It's supposed to be a kind of loving attention to what wants to be known and felt.

One of the teachers I studied with, when I was doing mindfulness of breath, gave me this instruction: "Every day I want you to come in and tell me something new about the breath." Boring, right? Oh my God, another breath. I just had one. But I would notice the space between the breaths, or the fact that the in-breath was cooler and the out-breath was warmer. That sometimes the breath would go all the way down to my belly and sometimes it was very shallow. One thing after another after another, learning to really listen and pay attention.

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches this. They invited him to a conference in San Francisco a couple of decades ago, probably in the late 80s or early 90s. It had Mikhail Gorbachev—this was after Perestroika—and George Shultz and Madeleine Albright and various Secretary of State type folks, all talking about world politics. And it was time for Thich Nhat Hanh to teach. It was lunchtime. And he said, "Before you eat, I want you to eat an orange with me." They passed out these oranges and he spent like half an hour getting them to feel it and smell it and rub its texture and begin to open it. By the end of that half hour, as someone who ran the conference said, they didn't know what hit them. They were more present for their lunch and for one another than they'd been in a really long time.

So that's what it means to have attention to this body and to the things that we do with this body. What wants to be respected in your body? What pain? What illness? What love? What longing? That's what attention offers. That kind of care. Courage. Clarity.

It also means that you need to respect your pain. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and a great mindfulness teacher and dear friend from the early years of all of our work together, got the inspiration at one of our retreats to start a program in the medical school in Massachusetts where he was. He opened a clinic in the basement of the medical school. And he said, "I'm going to teach mindfulness to all the people in the hospital that you doctors can't help." He did rounds

there and sat with doctors and said, "The ones who are in pain, the ones who are really afraid, the ones where the cancer treatment isn't going well—we have a clinic in the basement, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. You send them down to me."

And what he didn't say, but he said to me and others when we talked, was: "Because I have the big medicine." And the big medicine is teaching people how to be with the truth of the way things are. Then they can decide how to respond. Most of his work was with people who were trying to get out of their body and trying to fix things, trying to change things, to no avail in these cases. Those were the ones that got sent down. And he would say, "How about if we sit down and you start to make friends with your body as it is?"

And it turns out, as you know from meditation, that it's not the pain and the suffering that causes the most trouble, at least most of the time. It's the fear, the reaction, the tightness around it, the trying to get rid of it, all the stories that are told. And when you let that go and you soften and you hold the pain with loving awareness, all of a sudden most of the struggle that you're in drops away and you have a different life.

You understand this, don't you?

A Tibetan lama was staying with friends in Colorado. He was a great horseman. He took one of his favorite horses, Rocky, on a trail ride through the back country. Rocky was a very intelligent horse, but he didn't know how to walk a trail. It was a new situation, and leading the group also made him a little nervous. The lama coaxed him over certain big rocks and shifted his weight to indicate going around certain others, but Rocky kept stumbling. They came to a narrow place in the trail. On one side was a steep shale cliff, and on the other, a long drop into the river. Rocky stopped and waited for direction.

We both knew that one wrong move would plummet us into the river far below. I guided him toward the gorge, subtly shifting my weight toward the high wall of shale. I thought that if he slipped, I could jump off and save myself. The moment I shifted, Rocky stopped cold and craned his head around to look at me. He knew exactly what I was doing. I could tell he was shocked and hurt that I was planning to abandon him. The look in his eye said, "You and me together, right?" I shifted my weight back into the saddle and connected with him in my own center, and we traversed it just fine.

Attention. Respect to the situation we're in, to our own body, to the bodies of others, and to the body of the earth—which these days is calling for respect.

This past weekend there was a whole big week of climate change events in San Francisco, shepherded by Governor Jerry Brown, with leaders from all around the world. We had a day of leaders and teachers offering teachings and actions for climate change here at Spirit Rock. It was quite full. Joanna Macy was one of the many wonderful speakers—she's fantastic.

One of the speakers I did a panel with was a woman named Christiana Figueres. She was the United Nations Special Representative who created the Paris Climate Accord. She's had a million different honors. She also created the Rio Climate Conference. She's been doing climate conferences and bringing—roping these mostly men together—for decades now, working on climate in a remarkable way. Multilingual and talented and diplomatic and all those kinds of gifted things. But she's also a longtime dharma student of Thich Nhat Hanh. She said that happened when she was at her bottom and couldn't figure out how to do this. She went to Plum Village and met Thich Nhat Hanh, and he taught her what it meant to be centered in herself, to see the best possible outcome, to see the goodness in one another even when they're fighting, to make herself that place of peace.

She said what happened in Paris was that they were able to shift the dialogue—she said "we," but it certainly sounded like she was a big part of it—from victims and perpetrators, who were the bad countries and the ones that had been victimized, to our common humanity. That shift of perception, from victim and perpetrator to "we're in this together," made the Paris Climate Accord possible.

So respect for the earth, for our own bodies, for one another. Respect for our feelings. We have this river of feelings. Sometimes I read this list of five hundred emotions that we have. Anguished and antsy and apoplectic and amorous and argumentative—I just start with the A's, you know? And you go on and on. But how do we deal with them? We get caught in them. We hate some feelings. We love some others. Or can we be respectful? This is what sadness is like. This is what loss is like. This is what longing is like.

As the poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness too quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you like few divine ingredients." Because we all have loneliness. It's part of being human. You come in and you're kind of alone in that journey. I mean, you're with your mother, but all of a sudden there you are, a baby. How did this happen? And then you go out and people can love you and tend you, but at some point you're on your own. This is the reality of it. We're deeply connected, and at the same time we have every other kind of feeling. We have love and longing and disappointment and hate and fear. Every kind of emotion.

So what do we do with it? A friend of mine, Arturo Bejar, was a vice president at Facebook, and his job in part was to tend the problems there. He was like the complaints department. But at his time they had 1.1 billion users—now it's closer to 2 billion—and he said it didn't take very long to get a million complaints. So what do you do? He said a third of them were technical complaints, which he gave to the engineers.

They fix them. That's what engineers do. No problem.

But most of them were complaints of conflict between people. "You posted a picture of me and I don't look good." "How dare you post a picture of my children without permission?" "You said this about me"—all these things between people. So he would send them the boilerplate: "Our policy is that if it's lewd or lascivious or hateful, then we take it down, otherwise we leave it." No one was happy.

So then he said, "You know, there's got to be a better way." And he began to experiment. He sent out to all the people who were complaining about someone else, "Why don't you ask them what made them do it? What was their motivation? Why don't you tell them first how it made you feel?"

But then he found out that people didn't know what they felt. So he sent out those little emoticons—happy, sad, or whatever. "Now tell them how it made you feel. Now ask them a question." It made me sad or angry or upset or something. Now ask them what made you do it.

And when he began to invite them to talk about how they felt, and then to be open respectfully to what was going on, he said people would say, "Well, I thought you looked good in that picture." Or "I love your children and I thought other people would want to see it." He said ninety-plus percent of the conflict was eliminated—because people talked to each other respectfully. He said, "I get to teach social and emotional learning and conflict resolution to 980 million people." It's a very cool thing.

So with loving awareness, you begin to have the capacity to name the ocean of tears that you carry—the grief, the fear, the joy, the delight, the longing, all the things that make you human—to hold them all and to trust that you have the capacity to be present for them.

James Baldwin—and I imagine I read this probably every two or three dharma talks that I do, because it's so meaningful at this time: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense once hate is gone, they'll be forced to deal with their own pain."

That means that we've projected on the immigrants, the Mexicans, the black people, the brown people, the yellow people, somebody who's different than us. The communists, the socialists, or whatever. The communists were the enemy du jour when I was young. Now they're coming back around—we get them again, right?

But when we can't honor the fact that we're vulnerable—anybody not vulnerable here? Raise your hand. You can have your whatever-is-twelve-dollars back or something. That's our human life, that we are vulnerable. We're vulnerable to one another. We're vulnerable every time we go through an intersection and people respectfully stop at the red light so you can go through the green and be safe.

And here, because we're unwilling as a society to recognize that we too are vulnerable, that we're all interconnected, that we also have our own losses—whether it's the losses of jobs or the losses of America as the superpower, maybe not quite as super as it had been, whatever it happens to be—or the fears that we have, when we can't deal with them, we project them on others. People cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly because they sense once hate is gone, they'll be forced to deal with their own pain.

And to do that takes courage, dignity, and it's tremendously empowering. It brings a kind of inner well-being and freedom. And it means that when you're respectful of your measure of sorrows and your fears, as well as your beauty and your creativity, you can be respectful of others. It's really radical.

But this means respect for feelings, because they run the world.

During the Colombian Civil War of the last fifty years—however long that terrible conflict lasted—the FARC and others were in the jungles fighting the government. Toward the end, before the peace process that happened recently, those who were trying to support peace got photographs of the families of people who'd been in the jungle for ten and twenty years, and scattered them throughout the forest. There were pictures of your children who'd grown up, or your family members, your brother or your father, with little notes and messages to them. And that, touching the hearts of the people who'd been living there, reminded them—yes, reminded them about some love that trumped their anger.

So we learn to be respectful of our body, of our feelings, of our minds.

Minds. You know that bumper sticker? "A mind is a terrible thing to lose," something like that. It's sad. Well, even if you don't lose it, you sit with it—it's not always a picnic. It's full of reruns. Ninety-plus percent of those thoughts you had today, which you

thought you were kind of lost in mostly, they were the same thoughts you had yesterday. And the day before. It's like you're stuck in the Motel 6 with the shopping channel on and you can't turn it off.

Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you more than your mind untrained, said the Buddha. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than your own mind well cultivated and trained. Not even the most loving family member, the people who care for you.

So respect means to look at what's in our own mind. The kinds of thoughts that arise. "Oh, this is a judging thought. I hate judging thoughts. I don't want to judge anymore. Judging is so stupid." But what's that? Right? It's more judgment. What you can do is say, "Oh, thank you for your opinion. That's the judging mind. I appreciate that. That's the fearful mind. And that's the doubting mind—you can't do this right, you never do it right. Thank you for your opinion." We know whose voice it is. We won't talk about them. "Thank you for your guidance. I'm okay for now." You know?

And then the beautiful thoughts that come—of what's possible, the inspiration, the creativity, the love, all of those things. And you start to see that your thoughts really aren't yours very much. They're just conditioned things that have been programmed in there for a long time. And you start to shift your identity away from "my views." The Buddha said, "People who cling to their views go around the world annoying one another." *This land is mine. These children are mine.* These are words of folly from a person who doesn't know that even he is not his. Even your thoughts are not really yours. They come unbidden.

And you start to shift to where you attend and honor and respect. But your identity shifts from being caught in all the experiences that happen, and you become loving awareness itself. You become this space of mindfulness—

That has a kind of original innocence. A listening with your heart. And it expands the sense of who you are. You have your measure of tears and sorrows. You have your extraordinary gifts. The world has an ocean of tears and its unbearable beauty. And you let yourself say yes with a compassionate heart. This is our human life. You bow to it and say, yes, now let me navigate, seeing it the way it is, holding it with a space of loving awareness.

As that happens, you expand the sense of self. You don't take things quite so personally. You weep with all the parents who've lost a child, or all the parents whose children are in prison, or all the parents whose children are ill. It's not just your child. And you rejoice with all the parents whose children succeed, because it's our children. It's not yours, it's ours. You carry them in you.

George Washington Carver wrote, "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong—because someday in life you will have been all of these." And that's the gesture of respect, that we all get to play parts, as Shakespeare says. You are a man or woman of parts. And to be able to hold this with respect and loving awareness.

The Listening Project, coming out of the Quakers and nonviolence work, sends teams to Sudan and Libya and North Korea, everywhere. They simply want to sit down with the people that the world vilifies and say, "I want to listen to you. Tell me how it is for you." It's a radical gesture and a transformative one.

Even dogs appreciate this. There was a man who had a big Rottweiler, and he learned from the vet that it would be good to give it cod liver oil. So he would call the dog over, grab it, hold its mouth open, and pour in the cod liver oil. The Rottweiler hated it. But one day as he pulled the dog over, the bottle fell and there was a big puddle of cod liver oil on the floor. After he let go of the dog, the dog went over and licked it all up. It wasn't the cod liver oil that was the problem. It was the way it was being administered.

The whole path of awakening is respect. When people ask for a little attention, it's not a little thing. It's a big thing. And a generous heart is what you're born with—to not harm yourself or others, to refrain from causing harm with your actions, to not kill, to not steal. Those are gestures of respect, of reverence for life.

Wisdom and compassion see the way things are with tenderness and respect, and then you can respond. But you have to respect the way it is first. You have to respect the fact that there are ten thousand nuclear warheads still active on this earth before you can do anything about it. You can't pretend they're not there. You actually let that terror of that reality also have a bow. And then you say, all right, what can we do? What are our steps?

It can change the world—for the elderly, the youth, the teens, the disenfranchised, the rich, the poor, the Palestinians and Israelis, the Hutus and the Tutsis, the Christians and the Muslims and the Buddhists and the Jews and the atheists. Can we listen in a respectful way to ourselves, to one another? What a world it would be if we offered this.

Now somebody might raise their hand and say, well what about the big difficulties? What about racism? Such a crazy thing—what color are you? You're green, brown, blue, something? As if that made any sense. What about our prison system? Millions of people incarcerated in the prison industrial complex, a racist poverty prison, which is also our default mental hospital system. What kind of culture is this?

What about the endless wars—whether it's Syria or South Sudan or the people of Tibet, or our own cities and places? These also need respect.

I tell the story of working with Michael Mead and Luis Rodriguez and others, running retreats for young kids getting out of street gangs from Oakland and Chicago and L.A. They come in with their hoods up and their hats turned back, like, "You're going to do some poetry and teach me some meditation and shit like that? Come on, man. I'm on the street. People got nine millimeters. You've got to give me something better than that."

And so we would take a candle and light it and put it in the center of a table and say, "There are too many people in this room who need respect that haven't been acknowledged. Would you go out in the parking lot and collect a stone for every young person you know who's been killed? Put it by this candle and say their name."

And these kids would come back with their hands full of stones. "This is for Tito and this is for RJ and this is for homegirl." All the names. But when that's done and the candle's there and the stones are piled up, the hoods come down, the hats come off, and they say, "Okay, we're going to get real here. Let's talk about this." There's a respect for what they've survived and what they've lived through.

So what about racism and war, endless war? This is respect for Mara. Mara is the Indian god of aggression and temptation who attacked the Buddha—in the myth anyway—on the night of his enlightenment with all the possible temptations, and then the armies of Mara, and all the doubts. These are not small forces. The power of greed, of hatred, of fear, of delusion—civilizations rise and fall from these forces. Wars happen from these forces.

But they're not the end of the story.

Maha Ghosananda, that Gandhi of Cambodia who was bowing to the Dalai Lama, was part of the world campaign that got the Nobel Prize for trying to get rid of landmines. When he went to the U.S. Congress, he said, "What concerns me is not just the landmines in the earth." He had asked me as a friend if I would collect money for artificial limbs for the thousands of children in Cambodia that needed them. He said, "That's what concerns me." But then he said, "What concerns me is the landmines in the human heart." That's what he said to the whole U.S. Congress. That's where we have to start.

War is not the end of the story. People think that only force is the way to run the world. But the only thing that can meet violence and greed and hatred—the only force big enough, as Martin Luther King said—is soul force. After the church was bombed and the four children were killed, everything torn apart, he said, "We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering, and we will not hate you. We cannot obey your unjust laws, but we will soon wear you down with our capacity to suffer. And in loving you, we will bring you so far along that in the end you will come to that place of love as well."

That's another dimension of respect. It's love, really. We want it. The people around us want it. The earth needs it.

Without mindfulness, without loving awareness, we get lost in separation, in addiction, in grasping, in protection, in isolation, in fear, in racism—all those things. They're all sources of suffering. And yet mindfulness, loving awareness, offers us a doorway to freedom in ourselves, in this human incarnation with its ten thousand joys and sorrows. And it offers a possibility for society as a whole.

After Oxford, I went to teach in Parliament in England. It was really wonderful. One hundred eighty-five members of Parliament have signed on to the UK Mindfulness Group, Mindful UK. There are reports of how they're going to integrate it into the national health care system and the education system. Something in them knows that we need this. When we sat together, facing Brexit and all the political turmoil, and we did meditation, they said, "You know, this is the best thing we do all week."

It was like twenty MPs and members of the House of Lords, perhaps twenty or twenty-five people altogether. They said this is the best thing we do all week: we get quiet, we meditate, we listen. Then we listen to each other, even from different sides. We can relearn this. We all have our measure of tears. We all have our disappointments. But we can also treat each other in different ways.

I was leading a men's retreat here some years ago with my colleagues Wes Nisker and Robert Hall, a dear friend and wonderful teacher who is now right near the end of his life in hospice. In the evenings we would have a council where men would come into the center in small groups and be given a question: talk about fathers and sons, or talk about money, or talk about what it means to be a man, or talk about their sexual history. One of the things that was very evident with those questions is that everybody was confused. There wasn't a single man who got in the middle and talked about whether it was their sexuality or fathers and sons or whatever who didn't have some confusion about how to be a man. Just in case you're interested to know that. We're in it together, apparently.

But anyway, there was a fellow there who was talking about how we treat one another as men. He had a radio show in Los Angeles, a blues show. It was on Sunday nights, and he said, "I have a big following inside the prisons." So one day he got a letter from a man named George Jameson. The letter said, "I'm a follower of your show. I'd like to make a request. Could you put on your show some of the really early great blues legends? Mississippi John Hurt and Blind Lemon Jefferson." And he listed a number of other blues greats that he'd like to hear.

So the week after, this fellow went on his radio show and said, "I got a letter from George Jameson. He's obviously a man with understanding of the blues and its roots, a great aficionado. And I'm going to play for him some of the early Mississippi Delta blues—Blind Lemon Jefferson and Mississippi John Hurt and others."

A few weeks later he got a letter again from George Jameson. It said, "Thank you so much for playing those blues greats." And then: "I want to tell you, that's the first time in my life I can remember my name being said with respect."

Imagine that. Imagine that. You don't get it in prison, you can understand, but you also don't get it in some childhoods and in some neighborhoods and in some communities.

A year or two ago we had a prison project that was born out of Spirit Rock at San Quentin called the Insight Prison Project, or Insight Out—different names for it—and Jacques Verduin has been the main steward. There was a graduation in San Quentin that I went to as a speaker. There were a hundred men with mortarboards and graduation gowns who'd gone through a year-long program called GRIP—Guiding Rage Into Power—learning mindfulness and anger management and bodily practices like yoga, things to tend themselves.

They stood up and had a kind of class speaker who read: "We were violent men, and we now pledge"—then they all stood up—"that we will never use violence again in this world to solve a problem." It was very moving. "And we want to offer a deep apology to you and to the society and to all those that we've hurt." There were several hundred people witnessing it: state senators and mayors and people from the corrections department.

I gave a little talk, and then Luis Rodriguez, my buddy, a great Latino poet—he was the poet laureate of Los Angeles—author of *La Vida Loca: My Gang Days in L.A.*, got up to read. He's worked a lot in the prisons. He says proudly that his book *La Vida Loca* is the most stolen book in high school libraries around the country, so it's obviously a read.

He got up to read a killer poem, but he said, "I can't read my poem first. I have to say something." He said, "You men stood up and apologized to us. But it's we who have to apologize to you. Because many of you are in here because you had a childhood of disrespect, of abuse, of poverty, of drugs, of racism—of being part of a community that was marginalized and attacked. We as a society have failed you."

And I want to offer you an apology on behalf of those who are outside.

And then he read his poem. It was a very moving moment. To reverse it—he offered the kind of respect that these men deserved.

So this is sovereignty. To honor the gift in every human being. To honor the gift of your own body. To honor the gift in others. And we can all learn it. We all have our measure of disappointment. That's where the heart grows wise, you know.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who won the Nobel Prize in Liberia, said, "Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers. Now they remember our country for its women leaders." Turn that one around. It means it's not the end of the story—that when we bring respect, the story can be changed.

And then we become able to bless. Whatever we pay attention to, to offer that respect or that sovereignty, that honoring, becomes a blessing. Nelson Mandela wrote, "It never hurts to think too highly of a person. They often act the better because of it."

William Butler Yeats, who talks about all the blindness in his life and all the ways he's fallen into the ditches, says: "And yet I'm content to live it all again and yet again, if it be life to pitch into the frog spawn of a blind man's ditch. I'm content to follow to its source every event in action or in thought, measure the lot, forgive myself the lot.

When such as I cast out remorse, so great a sweetness flows into the breast. We must laugh and we must sing. We are blessed by everything, and everything we look upon is blessed."

When we understand this quality of respect—that we are this world, this is it, we are it—then it becomes possible to treat ourselves and those we meet with this gift of attention, of loving awareness, of respect. And it brings a freedom and a dignity and a kind of blessing of sovereignty to yourself and to all that you touch.

Let us sit for a moment in quiet.

O nobly born, do not forget who you really are. Do not forget the great heart of compassion, the wisdom that was born into you. And let yourself consider who or what in your life is longing for respect. What difficult circumstance, what conflict or people could you offer respect, even as there are differences? You take your seat halfway between heaven and earth and awaken the Buddha within. Wisdom and compassion are your birthright.

Thank you for coming tonight. Thank you for your meditation and your kind attention—your respectful attention—and for your support of this place. It's become a sanctuary for a lot of people: those who come on retreats and classes, those who walk the land. Now that you've come, it's one of your places, should you wish to return.

Take something good from the teachings tonight, whatever it reminded you of that you already carry, and go out into this beautiful darkness.

CHAPTER 82

The Buddha's Last Teachings: A Story of Inspiration and Wisdom

Jack Kornfield · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Jack Kornfield guides listeners through the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta—the story of the Buddha's final year of life—inviting us to understand these ancient teachings not merely as history but as symbolic myth that speaks to the heart. Drawing from this text, Kornfield illuminates the Buddha's guidance on wise society: how communities prosper through mutual respect, care for the vulnerable, and mindful attention to one another. He explores the famous metaphor of the teachings as a raft—useful for crossing the flood of suffering, but not to be carried as rigid doctrine.*
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> *The talk weaves together key themes of spiritual empowerment, including the Buddha's instruction that the Dhamma itself be our guide, the importance of intention in karma, and the teaching that liberation is available to all regardless of caste or station—exemplified by the courtesan Ambapālī's invitation to the Buddha. Kornfield reflects on Māra's role in awakening, the untarnishable nature of the liberated mind symbolized by gold, and the profound message that any place can be the kingdom of righteousness when the heart is pure.*
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> *Kornfield concludes with the Buddha's final instruction: "Make of yourself a light." This empowering message reminds us that the responsibility for awakening lies within our own hearts and hands. The talk offers practical wisdom for navigating divided times while maintaining connection to timeless truths of compassion, mindfulness, and inner freedom.*

When I was reflecting on what to speak about and teach this evening, for some of you who've been coming the last couple or few months, I've been doing stories—big stories. Our theory and legend about what women want. An ancient story from the Vedas about Nachiketa's descent to the underworld, to the Lord of Death, and what one learns there. Tonight I want to share another story, a very Buddhist story, and talk about it a little more.

Part of the reason for doing it is that I've been involved in other ways recently in this very divided time that we live in, with a lot of concern, as most people I know have. Last week, Trudy and I went down to migrant shelters in Mexico on the other side of the border to help someone who was doing teachings that were helpful to the staff and to the migrants there—a women's shelter and a men's shelter. I've also been involved in a project where we got 130 other Buddhist teachers to sign a letter that we sent out to

all of our lists and communities to help get out the vote. Not just that you all vote—I hope you're all going to vote—but to try to activate a community through Faith in Action, which is a non-partisan group of churches and synagogues and mosques and Buddhist temples, all simply saying that it's a responsibility as a member of society to treasure our participation and to go out and support people who might not otherwise do it.

But what I thought about tonight, and the story I want to teach from, is actually a timeless story. It's not so much focused on the moment. Perhaps next month I'll do a story about the bodhisattva in action in the world in a way that's helpful. But this is a story that has a much bigger perspective. I think we need that sometimes—to step out of the immediate reality, the dilemmas and conflicts and worries and hopes, and have a bigger picture.

What's unusual about the story tonight is that I'm taking a Buddhist text, which I rarely do here, called the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. This text tells the story of the last year of the Buddha's life. When you read it initially, it seems like a historical account: the Buddha went here, he said this, he did that, and you're reading history. But it's not. It's actually, as much as anything, a myth. I want to invite you, as you listen, to understand these kinds of ancient teachings as symbolic and mythological as much as literal.

If you don't have a sense of the symbolic and the mythological, then you take whatever it is—the Vedas or the Buddhist texts or the Bible or the Quran—completely literally. Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist and historian, said this is a complete confusion of levels.

For example, it says in the Bible that a rich man is less likely to go to heaven than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. You've heard that. It turns out "the eye of a needle" is actually the name of a very small gate in the wall that surrounds Jerusalem. It's not about a needle at all—it had a very different origin. But it also has a different meaning. It's not about needles or gates, obviously. It has some other meaning.

Just as Moses and the burning bush—if you read Annie Dillard's remarkable natural world book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she writes about the day she saw the tree with the lights in it. She said, "I would walk on my knees across the desert for hundreds of miles to see that tree one more time." It doesn't mean that the bush was burning or that the tree was on fire. What it means is that we have a capacity to see this world in an illuminated way, to see the magic of the bay trees and the oaks and the sunlight on them and the sparkling, and to realize that every tree is life growing in new directions and putting itself out there, drinking in sunlight and being part of this fabric. We don't see the mystery and the magic of it.

So we understand these ancient stories not just as historical. We keep telling them because they resonate in a different way in the heart and mind, in a symbolic and mythological way. I'll have a little quiz for you as we go along, so you can see if this is of value to you.

This is the text on the Buddha's last teachings, the story of the last year of his life. If you read it as history, it would be pretty boring. But it's actually part of one of the great myths of humankind—the Buddha's life. The way you know it's mythological is that it starts with a phrase something like "once upon a time." You've heard that before. And it ends literally with a phrase that says, "This is how it was in the old days." So it really feels like a fairy tale when you read it.

The text has two themes. One is guidance for practice—how the Buddha wanted to leave the community, guidance for the monks and nuns and laypeople. The other is about wise relationship in spiritual community. The whole underpinning is the empowerment of those who were around the Buddha or who were receiving the teachings. It's really a text about empowerment.

It takes place in the ancient forests of India, when India was truly forested and there were many tigers. Some of it takes place on Vulture's Peak, in the mountains of the Ganges Plain. Some of it along the River Ganges.

But in an India that's very different than modern India. An India that was covered with wildness. And I know when I first went to India, oh gosh, forty-some years ago—I forget, I think the population was 400 million, 450 million. It's now 1.2 billion. It was crowded then. Where do they put them now, you know? It's kind of remarkable how the human population has grown. But it's also affected the landscape in a way. So you have to imagine that this was a verdant and wild landscape.

And so here's the Buddha sitting in a grove in the forest. And his attendant comes to him at the very beginning of this and says, "I have the chief minister of one of the local kings coming by with an important question." And the question is: Should we make war on the Vajjians? They haven't behaved that well, and we're thinking of making war and taking over their kingdom.

And the Buddha's response, which is a really compelling one in a certain way—he says to the chief minister of the king: Do the Vajjians meet regularly in harmony? Do they treat one another with respect? Do they listen to one another with care? Do they meet in harmony and disperse in harmony? If they do, they can be expected to prosper and not decline.

And then he goes on and says: Do they follow the wisest traditions of their ancestors and elders and great teachers? If they do, they'll prosper and not decline. Do they take care of the vulnerable among them—the women, the children, those who are vulnerable in other ways? If they do, they will prosper and not decline. Do they take care of the natural environment and the sacredness of the nature around them? If they do, they will prosper and not decline.

Now I had a chance to more or less read that text at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering a couple of years ago that we had with 120 Buddhist teachers. It's not going to happen again soon, we know this—but leaving that aside. These are really the teachings of wise society.

And then the Buddha goes on and he says to the community around him: If you listen to one another with respect, if you care for the sick and the vulnerable among yourselves in the community, if you treat the temples and the places that are your dwelling places with respect and care, the environment around you, if you practice your own mindfulness—and then there's another really beautiful phrase where he says: If you preserve your personal mindfulness, and as long as the monks and nuns, both in public and in private, show loving-kindness to those around them in acts of body, speech, and mind or heart, then you will prosper and not decline.

So the minister bows to the Buddha and says, "Thanks for the advice. The Vajjians sound like their kingdom is pretty well together. I guess we shouldn't make war against them."

And then the Buddha says, "All right, that's the teachings for the wise society of the kingdom, but here now for you as a community."

So here's the mythological question: Why didn't the Buddha just say, "War is a bad thing, don't kill people"? I mean, we'd like to say that, wouldn't we? But why didn't he say that? I can see your little brains are starting to percolate a little. And I'll give the answers to these questions, but I warn you they might not be the right answer, because you have to understand it in your own way.

My understanding is that he didn't say "don't go to war" to a king, because what he was interested in teaching was something deeper, which is the cause and effect of things. Not just the effects of things, but the causes. And if you have a just society and you have people treating each other well, then the fruits of that will be peace, will be strength in the community—and the same for those who followed him. He didn't want to just say "this is bad" or "this is good," but he said: Look to the way you live with one

another, and that is what is actually going to create the world that you live in. Do you understand this? It's easy to say war is bad, but what are the conditions that make it happen?

So then the gist of the story as it goes on is his travels, the announcement of his death, the last disciples, and the last teachings—what to keep in mind as he gets ready to die, and what happens when you die, and things like that.

So he's again traveling with a group of monastics, and now they're at Pavarica's Mango Grove. And Sariputra, who is the wisest of his disciples, sits with him and says, "There has never been a more enlightened and better teacher than you in this world. Never been someone—" and Sariputra is a very wise and wonderful figure in this, but he says, "You are the best. There's never been anybody as wise and wonderful as you."

And the Buddha looks back and says, "Sariputra, do you know all the Buddhas past and future?"

Do you know all the great teachers of the world? How can you make a statement like that?" He calls him out, essentially saying, "You're boasting, but what's really the truth of this?"

And Sariputra answers with a beautiful image. He says, "It is as if there's a great city, and to protect the city from marauders and all the things that could harm its inhabitants, there is one gate. At this one gate stands a guard who sees with great clarity what's skillful and helpful to those who inhabit the city and what's dangerous. Living in a completely present and mindful way, this guard allows what's useful to come in and keeps what's not useful out."

Then he explained: "This is the abode of mindfulness and compassion. The gate is the present moment. If we can stay present with what arises—with the people we're in contact with, with the tasks we have to do, with the care we have for the earth or the community around us—if we tend the present moment, then all things get tended. This quality of presence, this freedom to be here and now fully, is the abode of the awakened ones. Therefore I can say there's never been a greater one, because this is the place."

He gave a pretty good answer. And the Buddha said, "Just so, Sariputra," allowing it. The abode of the Buddha—the word Buddha means one who is awake—rather than being lost in thought, lost in past and future, in fear and confusion and reactivity, is to actually be present with a liberated heart and mind.

Here's a line from Rumi: "What's the fuss we make when we will all go one by one through that same gate?" Now he's talking about a different meaning of gate, but you can also hear the mythological resonance of it. This is all we have—the present moment. That's one gate. But there's also the gate of death. The fact is that our lives are limited. What's the fuss when we will all go one by one through that same gate?

In this story, the Buddha continues to wander with a company of friends. Then the question arises: what is a wise relationship to the teachings? He comes to the banks of the Ganges River and says to those with him, "Followers, I have offered you teachings to cross the flood—a boat, a raft. These are teachings that allow you to come from the shore of confusion and delusion and fear and separateness, to cross the flood of suffering to a place of inner well-being no matter what the changing conditions are, to a freedom of heart, to a dwelling of liberation and compassion."

Then he asks, "Friends, once you've crossed the river, would it be useful to carry the boat or the raft with you?" This is a famous part of this myth and metaphor. And of course, the monks and nuns and people around him, being intelligent, say, "No, sir."

"Just so, my friends," he says. "Use these teachings as a raft, as a boat, as a way to move from the places of entanglement and fear and confusion to that shore of liberation. But don't be attached. Don't carry them in some rigid way. Use the teachings to bring you to a place of freedom."

We know from history that an awful lot of people have taken spiritual teachings—across many spiritual and religious traditions—and don't know how to put the boat down. It's kind of heavy. And not only that, then you get into fights about it with other people.

The Dalai Lama wakes up each morning and takes this vow from Shantideva: "May I be a boat, a bridge, a raft for all who need to cross the flood." He uses that metaphor. "May I be a lamp for those lost in the darkness. May I offer myself as benefit to beings so that they might cross the flood of confusion and fear and come to a place of inner safety and well-being."

They carry on, and at this point the Buddha goes to sit quietly in the forest under a great tree. As he's sitting, Mara appears. In Indian mythology, Mara is the name of a god or being who represents all the causes of suffering. Sometimes in Victorian translations it's rendered as "the evil one," although he's not exactly evil. He's the force of ignorance and greed and fear and hatred and confusion embodied.

Mara was the one who came to the Buddha when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree before his enlightenment and tempted him with all possible temptations. When the Buddha didn't move, Mara unleashed his armies of anger and aversion and hatred—all the weapons and aggression of Mara's forces. And finally came doubt: "What right do you have to sit here?"

The Buddha reached down and touched the earth and said, "The earth is my witness that I have offered my whole life, and many lifetimes, out of compassion and care for the beings of this world. I have a right to awaken, as does every human being."

This is the beginning of hearing about Mara in Buddhist myth. And Mara reappears regularly for the Buddha.

He doesn't just go away, which is a very interesting thing, isn't it? Even the Buddha has to deal with Mara periodically. And not only that—Mara gets to Spirit Rock regularly, and even to your own community.

Mara comes, and normally when Mara arises and appears to the Buddha, the Buddha simply says, "Oh, I see you, Mara. Here you are again." And just by saying "I see you, Mara," Mara realizes he's been recognized and sort of slinks away. That's the way the story is told.

But in this case, Mara comes and says, "May the Blessed One take final nirvana. May the Blessed One—now you've completed all your tasks. There are monks and nuns and the whole community and lay people and so forth." Mara had been urging the Buddha to hang it up for a long time. And the Buddha finally says, "All right, you need not worry, Mara. It's not long. In several months, I will release this old eighty-year-old body."

So Mara—it's very interesting. Thich Nhat Hanh, the great teacher, had a t-shirt that many of you have seen: "No mud, no lotus." And no Mara, no Buddha. You actually need Mara in the story or you don't get enlightened. You need Mara to come and test you.

In some way, what this says is that this is a dualistic world in which there is both love and connection and a timeless truth of freedom, but there's also separateness and fear and confusion. And because there is, that becomes the seed or the ground from which liberation can arise. That's just the way it's built. No mud, no lotus.

Or as Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes: "If only it were all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary simply to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

And so Mara appears not because Mara shouldn't be there, but because Mara is actually part of the dance of awakening itself. The Buddha says, "All right, Mara, now I see you again. And this time I'll go along with you, because in several months it will be my time."

If I were to ask you, why did Mara come? I've sort of answered that question already. You need Mara. No one would go to the movie if you don't have a villain. You know how it works. This is our human condition. It's how it's designed.

So we see Mara, and Thich Nhat Hanh talks about inviting Mara in for tea. "Okay, I see you again, Mara. Come on in, how's it going? How is it being the evil one?" And Mara says, "Well, it's not actually that much fun. How are you doing, Buddha?"

You start to have a different relationship with the difficulties. Instead of seeing them as something you have to get rid of, you start to see them as part of the fabric of life, and you discover the possibility of welcoming them with tea—while saying, "All right, but don't stay too long. There's a whole other reality we can inhabit."

Then a great earthquake happens as soon as the Buddha says, "Yes, Mara, I will be dying—I'll take my final nirvana in these next months." A hair-raising earthquake and thunder. Ananda, his beloved attendant, comes running. "What is this earthquake? What is this earthquake?"

And the Buddha says—because he was a list maker—"There are eight causes for earthquakes. There's the natural earthquake, but also there's the earthquake when a Buddha is born, when a Buddha gets enlightened, and so forth. And this earthquake was because Mara came and asked if I was ready to leave this mortal life, and I said yes, it's my time." And thus there was this enormous earthquake.

Now, why an earthquake? Again, thinking mythologically or symbolically. Because each of these events—the enlightenment, the earthquake at the first teaching that came after, the death of the Buddha—are all earth-shaking events. When you think about the one or two billion people on earth who have been affected by this one human being as a teacher over these 2,600 years, you have a little earthquake happening there in the cosmos, in some symbolic way, signifying that something profound has occurred.

And then Ananda gets really upset and begins to weep, saying, "Oh, many times you've said you could live a long time, that you could live a century. Please don't die yet. Please live for a century."

And then the Buddha responds, "My body is now like an old cart held together with straps and ropes." You know what an old body is like—some of you are getting there, right? He said, "It's finished its time, its journey." And he said, "I must now take my nirvana in a few months."

And Ananda said, "But you said you could live for a century."

And the Buddha said, "Yes, but yours is the fault, Ananda. I gave you hints over these last years—in the Black Snake Pool and Jivaka's Mango Grove, in the Rajgir Deer Park, in the cool wood of Tapoda—and if you had asked me three times, 'Please live for a century,' I gave you hints that I could. Two times I would have demurred, no. But on the third time"—this is fairytale, right?—"by the third time, I would have had to say yes, and I would have lived for a hundred years. Yours is the fault, Ananda."

Here's his beloved attendant for all these years. Talk about a guilt trip, right? "Yours is the failure. You've ignored these hints."

Now, why would he do this? Thinking again symbolically or mythologically, I'll give your little brain some time here. Here's one reason, one important reason: that the teacher-student relationship is not one way. That you too have a responsibility. It's not just held in one part of this dyad.

And later, right before the Buddha dies, in this very same text, he praises Ananda—because Ananda was the most beloved of his disciples—for his care and beauty, his timing and sensitivity and guidance and all of these things. He loves Ananda. But in this story, what he's doing is saying, "It's not just up to me, Ananda. It's up to our relationship with one another. And even as the Buddha, I need you as you need me to help awaken."

The teacher-student relationship interweaves, and we awaken together. This puts a kind of responsibility back into the arms and the hands and the hearts of those who are practicing. It's not just somebody saying something—it's yours too. And you have the responsibility for the well-being of all that you touch.

In each scene, when various visitors come to see the Buddha as he wanders and ask their questions or receive teachings—and he's wandering with a large company of followers—after he gives teachings, he says a phrase that's repeated over and over again, related to what just happened with Ananda. After he offers these beautiful teachings,

he looks at the people who were there, and sometimes it says their heart opened, their mind became vast. They attained to some new state of freedom or liberation beyond their small, separate sense of self. They became filled with compassion for the whole world. Those kind of nice things happen.

And then he would look at them, or he'd say, "All right, here, practice this. Do mindfulness of the breathing, or do mindfulness of the body, or do a compassion practice."

At the end, he would say this phrase: "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit."

Listen to that one, baby. Because there's something really important in that phrase. He's saying, "All right, I can help you. I can point to who you really are—to that possibility of liberation of heart that is your birthright. But no one can be liberated for you. No one can do it for you."

Now I place it in your hands, in your heart, and it becomes yours to do with. And there's something enormously empowering in this. You understand this? Now it's in your good hands. Now it is in your heart. The teacher can't do it for you. That's why it's in this story. No one can let go for you. No one can awaken for you. No one can love for you.

So then Ananda says, and the people around him, "Who will be our guide?" You know, who's going to run the company when the CEO retires, basically? And the Buddha replies, "The Dharma, the teachings, will be your guide. I will not put another person in charge of the community. Let the truth and the teachings themselves be your guides. Be an island unto yourself. Take these teachings and responsibility. Do as you see fit."

And then they said, "How?" To contemplate with mindfulness and loving awareness this very body and feelings and mind. The ways that the mind and heart get entangled in the world. And to become aware of the possibility of releasing grasping and finding freedom in itself, within your own experience.

He said, "Let the Dharma, the teachings, and the Vinaya"—which is the word for the virtuous conduct of the monastics—be your guide. And he goes on to talk about virtue. He says those who do not live with attention to their words and deeds, who don't act out of kindness and respect, they lose their wealth, they lose their reputation, they lose their sleep, and they die confused. He doesn't mince words about it. But on the other hand, if you pay attention to your life and live with dignity and care and respect for living beings, for yourself and others, then there comes honor and respect, wealth, health, well-being, and ease of sleep, and a death that comes naturally in its appropriate time and easily for you.

So he's talking about the heart of practice—how we actually embody these teachings and how we live.

And then one of the monks asks how we know what are the right teachings, what are the true teachings of the Buddha. And he said, "It might be that you heard them from the lips of the Buddha. It might be that the community of followers say these are the real teachings. It might be from a circle of learned elders. It might be a master who repeats these. None of these will tell you for sure what are the teachings of the Buddha. You cannot rely on any of these."

But instead, if what you hear conforms to the essence and the gist of these teachings —no matter what anybody says—that compassion, loving kindness, joy, equanimity, the awakened heart, these grow in you through these practices and understandings. That wisdom shows you that attachment and grasping, fear and confusion, lead to suffering. And there's a practice, a way to live, that releases you from suffering. The noble truths of suffering and its causes, and the path to the end of suffering. The wise attention that brings us to this freedom. If it conforms with the gist and the heart of these teachings and you know this in yourself, then you know you're following the right way.

And it's a beautiful thing. Again, it places it in your own hands and hearts—your spiritual life.

So he goes on and wanders with a large retinue. And he's getting sicker now, so the travel is difficult. But yet his heart is at peace, even though his body is achy, even though he's getting older and sicker. And there he is in a beautiful forest grove, and the courtesan—one of the most famous courtesans of the time—

Ambapali, dressed in the finest silks and perfumes, with a retinue of followers and carriages, arrives at the edge of the forest grove, then walks on foot to pay her respects to the Buddha.

And it says the Buddha instructed and roused and inspired and awakened them, teaching the practices of mindfulness and loving awareness, of compassion and inner freedom, and of the fundamental dignity of life and of each human being.

The courtesan and her group describe a beautiful transformation: "I have shifted from being confused and closed to open and free in my heart and mind" — this sense of awakening that the Buddha had touched in her. And she then asks, "Will the Buddha and the company of followers come and take a meal at my home?" The Buddha agrees.

Shortly thereafter in the story, the nobles, the princes of the Licchavi people start to arrive with their carts dressed in blue and yellow and white, in silks and incredible cloth and adornment, with royal carts and horses and elephants. They also stop at the forest grove, and they see Ambapali leaving. They say, "Oh my God, this mango woman got here before us" — which is a slang for whatever you want to imagine they were saying about her, something of a Me Too moment of the old days. They've come to invite the Buddha to their palaces to give teachings.

The Buddha says, "Thank you for the invitation, but I've already accepted the invitation of the courtesan Ambapali. I cannot come."

And they said, "Oh no, oh no." They raced after her and offered her a hundred thousand pieces of gold. She says, "Not for a whole kingdom would I give up this invitation to make offerings to the Blessed One and have him come to my place."

So here's another question for you, my friends. Why the courtesan? And why does the Buddha accept her invitation and not that of the princes? What do you think? Maybe you like courtesans, I don't know. But there's obviously a deeper and very important meaning.

And the meaning is: Who can practice? Who can awaken? What are the fundamental human values of these teachings?

From the very beginning, the Buddhist teachings are a huge contrast to the racist society that we live in now, and that was also there in the caste system of India at his time. He was very clear that not by caste, not by race, not by birth is one higher or lower. The nobility of a human being is simply a matter of their heart.

And the Buddhist texts begin: "O nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember the possibility of freedom, of liberation, of compassion, of the great heart, of awakened heart that is born in you. Remember who you are. You're not this small separate self. You are loving awareness itself. And this possibility is there for every single one of you."

From the very beginning, the Buddha was adamant not to buy into caste and race and all those kinds of delusions that separate people from one another and cause so much enormous suffering. Ambapali is here to represent the fact that whoever comes with a good heart — that's the noble person, not by any other standard.

Then he's at the Pava Mango Forest, and Cunda the smith offers his last meal. The Buddha says, "You give it to me and give the other food to my followers. I'll take the special food that you have prepared for me."

Even before he eats it, he reassures the smith that there are great treasures in this world. And one of the great treasures, blessings, merits, power, benefits, is the person who gives the first meal to the Buddha after he's enlightened, and the person who gives the last meal to the Buddha at the end of his life.

Now it happens that this meal was spoiled somehow, unknown to the man who provided it. The Buddha got terribly sick with dysentery afterward and then dies, as the story goes on. It's as if the Buddha knew that nobody else should eat this. It's my time. This is what you offered, and that's the way things unfold. But no matter what happens with this, you receive great merit. There's an enormous blessing that comes from giving the first meal and the last meal to the Buddha.

Now why would he say this? Talk about how bad you might feel. "I'm sorry I gave the food that poisoned the Buddha" — that wouldn't be a very happy circumstance to find yourself in, right?

He's reassuring him because, in the end, in the teachings, it is the motivation of the heart and the intention that matters. Chunda is offering this with purity and the best of intentions. And even though sometimes things don't work out the way you would like, the key to karma is the motivation behind things.

Now, we might say, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." But actually, that proverb means the road to hell is paved with *ignorantly* good intentions, because we can have intentions that aren't really clear and wise. But if you have a truly caring heart and clarity and wise intention, that plants the seed for something good to happen, however long it takes for that seed to bear fruit. This is really talking about the seed or the root of karma itself.

Let me share the image I use. If you pull your car out of the driveway of your house and crash through the fence of the house next door into the living room because you're so angry at your neighbor—the neighbor from hell, who cut down all those beautiful trees on the property line, mistreated your dog, did all these terrible things—if you got so furious that you crashed your car into their house, the blue lights will come along and take you away in handcuffs.

But if you're in your car and you back out of the driveway and crash through the fence into the living room of that same neighbor because the accelerator pedal stuck—it's the same person, it's the same car, it's the same action of the crash. Instead of the blue lights, the ambulance comes, followed by the insurance company. What is the dif-

ference between those two? Not the person or the vehicle or the experience, but the intention behind it. That's the teaching here, where the Buddha is reassuring this person who gives him his last meal: it's the goodness of your heart that really plants the seeds.

So then, they are sitting in deep meditation and five hundred carts come by. Some huge train of merchants passes by the river where the Buddha is sitting on the edge. Then there's a tremendous thunderstorm, and he says to Ananda, "I want a cup of water."

Ananda says, "But the river's all been stirred up by the carts and the rainstorm."

The Buddha says, "Please get me a cup of water from the river."

Ananda goes to the river, and magically it is completely clear. He brings the Buddha a beautiful cup of water. The Buddha drinks from it, and a wandering yogi who has come looking for the Buddha sees this and says, "I've never seen anything like this. How did you do that?"

The image is of alum—if you know what alum is, it's a substance that, if you have cloudy water and put alum in it, helps all the particulates settle to the bottom, and the water becomes clear. In this case, what does it point to? There is a reality beyond the changing conditions of form—beyond storms and lightning and carts—a timeless reality so clear and pure it cannot be touched by the circumstances of the world.

And this isn't just physical, because again, this is symbolic and metaphorical. It's like Nelson Mandela walking out of Robben Island prison after twenty-seven years with the understanding that they can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit. The Buddha is manifesting in this myth, this story, that there's an untouchable, unshakable reality of your own heart and mind.

Then Pukkusa, the wanderer who has come to see the Buddha, makes an offering and gives him a set of golden robes—beautiful golden-colored robes, a little bit like our monk who's sitting here in the second row who has come to visit. As the Buddha puts the robes on, his skin starts to glow and give off a golden light.

Now, what is that about? It sounds very mercantile, doesn't it? But it has another meaning. Gold—I have this lovely gold wedding ring that says inside, "I love you, thank you"—one of gold's great characteristics is that it doesn't tarnish. It can go through all the different changes, but there's something in the chemical structure of the element of gold that remains unchanged, unless there are very special circumstances like aqua regia for you chemists. Other than that, it doesn't tarnish. That's partly why it was so treasured and valued.

In the same way, the glowing skin of the Buddha was a representation of a state of heart and mind—of compassion for the whole world and a liberated heart and mind—that is untarnished by changing conditions. It doesn't matter if there are storms or all kinds of other things.

So now the Buddha continues. We're getting near the end of the story, and I know it's almost your bedtime, so this is a bedtime story. The text describes great pains, bloody, severe sickness. Why would it get so graphic? Because that's how it happens. It's just what bodies do at the end. They give up.

And they fall apart in different ways. And it often can be painful—coming in and going out. Spirit coming into the body and leaving the body. The body doesn't want to die, and it has to kind of fall apart some before it does. And finally it gives up.

This description says, this is just part of being, of human incarnation. And it's important to see it for the way that it is.

And at this point, the Buddha lays down in the lion's pose on his right side, between two sal trees, and the trees immediately go into bloom. And then around the trees, it says there are angels and Brahmas and Devas from the ten thousand world systems, all shining their eyes and their light down on the Blessed One.

And what is it about the trees blooming and the radiance that's there, even while the body is severe, bloody sickness and great pains? What does this say? That even in death, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, there is an inviolable spirit that you're invited to remember, to know that this is who you are—a purity.

And then Ananda says, he complains, and he says, "Don't die here. This is a miserable backwater, a daub and wattle village." I know some anthropologists translated this thing, right? You know, mud and sticks and so forth. "This is not a proper place for the Blessed One to die."

And the Buddha says, "Do not call this a miserable backwater."

Now why would this be here? Why is Ananda saying this is a miserable daub and wattle village, don't die here? And he says, "You've got to go to Benares or Kosala or one of the great—go to Paris and die there. Make it a good one, right?"

And the Buddha says, "Do not call it a miserable backwater. Once upon a time, long ago, in this very spot, lived an ancient monarch named King Sudasana, who was a wheel-turning monarch"—which means a righteous king. "And his kingdom was well-populated, a kingdom of justice for all, prosperous, never free from the sounds of ele-

phants and carriages, gongs and commerce, cattle and cymbals and joys. And the great roads from his palace stretched out in each of the four directions. And I will die here, thank you."

Now why is this in there? What could this mean? What the Buddha is speaking about, T.S. Eliot called the still point of the turning world—that absolutely any place, when the mind becomes silent and the heart becomes vast, any place is the kingdom of righteousness. Exactly where you are is the place of liberation, is the center of justice, the center of well-being and the kingdom of righteousness. It's not found in the physical world at all. But wherever you are, when the heart is pure and the eyes are open to see this world with compassion and freedom, this is the place of awakening.

And then there's one last visitor, and Ananda says, "No, no, you're getting ready to die." And the Buddha says, "No, let him come in. Let him come in." And it's really the Buddha's last act of compassion. When he says, "Let him come in," these teachings are open-handed. There are teachers who hide away and put the teachings in secrets. He says, "I've given you everything you need. I've reminded you of everything you need to know to awaken your own heart and mind, without holding back anything. Let him come in. Let whoever they are—let me give this away." And it's a very, very beautiful moment.

And then he looks around and he says, "Does anybody have any doubts? Have I not taught you well? Is there some question you have? I've shown the way for liberation—to not cling to this world, to step out of the small sense of self and fear and confusion and rest in the liberated heart. I've pointed the way to what he called the sure heart's release."

No one had questions.

He said, "Then be of good resolve, all of you nobly born."

And he says something very beautiful then. He says, "For if you practice wisely, the earth will never be free of enlightened beings, of awakened beings." Remember, he goes on, all created things are impermanent. They all change. Be a lamp, a light unto yourself. Find your freedom. And he closed his eyes and went into deep meditation and died.

This is a poem from Mary Oliver, "The Buddha's Last Instruction":

I think of this every morning as the east begins to tear off its many clouds of darkness, to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet. An old man, he laid down between two sal trees, and he might have said anything knowing it was his final

hour. Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen. No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head. He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd. "Make of yourself a lamp," he said. "Make of yourself a light."

And he spoke to that illumination that is there in you and in each of us.

When he died, some of the monks and followers cried and tore their hair out. "Oh, the Blessed One is gone!" And some of the more awakened ones said, "Hey, didn't he just teach you that everything's impermanent? Why are you holding on?" And they grumbled, the awakened ones, the enlightened ones, grumbled about the people who were grieving.

I love this part, actually. Why is the grief there, and why are they complaining? He just said it! It really makes it human, doesn't it? Because it helps you to hold the opposite.

In one way, there is a timeless reality. When the great sage Ramana Maharshi was dying of cancer, his students came to him and said, "Please don't leave us, please don't leave us." He was very sick. And he looked back and said, "But where could I go? Where could I go? For who I am and who you are here is timeless. This is just my body. That's not who I am. That's not who you are. Where could I go?"

So that's one side of the paradox. But on the other side, Marpa, this great Tibetan sage and teacher of Milarepa, one of the greatest of the Tibetan teachers—his son died. And Marpa started to grieve and weep. His students came and said, "But you're supposed to be awakened and enlightened. All things come and go. Isn't birth and death just an illusion?" And Marpa looked back, weeping, and said, "Yes, and the death of a child is the greatest illusion of all." And wept.

These are the things that we have to hold together. The sorrows of the world, which we know right now are so visible. And the timeless truths—that we can plant the seeds of liberation and care and respect for one another in both wise society and in our own personal life. This is what's possible for us.

A great funeral was held. They had asked the Buddha beforehand what should be done, and they made a big stupa and treated his remains like that of a king—five hundred layers of linen and cotton and perfume. But they couldn't light the fire because Venerable Maha Kassapa, this great disciple of the Buddha, was still walking there with five hundred monks and nuns. All these numbers—five hundred just meant lots of them. And so they kept trying to light the fire and it wouldn't light.

And then Maha Kasapa came and paid his bow, laid his head at the feet of the Buddha. And then the fire spontaneously lit, and there was, of course, another earthquake. Flowers rained down from the heavens to celebrate and honor the World-Awakened One.

And the most important thing the Buddha said is this: for you who might long for justice or beauty or compassion, for you who wish to live a life of integrity and virtue—if you practice these teachings, not just hear them, but if those who have heard them practice rightly, the earth will not be free of those who are awakened.

This is the Dharma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end.

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This is a story of empowerment. It's a story of the passing on of one of the great treasures of humankind. And the point, having used a Buddhist text tonight, is not for you to become Buddhists. Spare your friends and family. It's to become *buddhas*. That's a much more interesting occupation.

To actually embody and take to heart—within yourself and within your community and within a society that is so hungry for integrity, so hungry for compassion for the vulnerable, so hungry for a spirit that's untouched by all the praise and blame and gain and loss and yet still carries itself with dignity—this is to display the possibility of freedom.

Now you have these teachings as reminders. Now it is time for you to do as you see fit.

CHAPTER 83

The Marvelous Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti: A Story of Entering All the Realms with an Awakened Heart

Jack Kornfield · 1h16

> *In this special winter solstice teaching, Jack Kornfield presents the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, a beloved Mahāyāna text celebrated for its humor, poetry, and profound non-dual wisdom. The sūtra tells of Vimalakīrti, a lay bodhisattva who deliberately falls ill to draw the Buddha's enlightened disciples to him, where he challenges their conceptual understanding with playful dialogues about the nature of reality, liberation, and the limitations of dualistic thinking.*
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> *Kornfield weaves the ancient narrative with contemporary reflections on imagination, compassion, and our capacity to envision a more awakened world. He explores how Vimalakīrti moves freely through all realms—casinos, cabarets, and places of suffering—teaching liberation without being caught by conventional distinctions of pure and impure, sacred and mundane. The teaching includes the famous encounter with a goddess who exchanges bodies with Śāriputra, demonstrating that awakening transcends gender and all conceptual categories.*
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> *The talk culminates in a blessing cord ceremony where participants set intentions for the coming year, tying knots representing refuge, compassion, and personal vows. Drawing on teachers from Ram Dass to Mary Oliver, Kornfield invites listeners to see the sacred in every being and circumstance, reminding us of the Buddha's final teaching: "Make of yourself a light."*

So often in many previous years on the Monday night that's close to Christmas and New Year's, I'll do teachings that are holiday stories—beautiful stories of people caring for one another in this time. Tonight, because the last couple of months on Mondays I've been telling some very long stories, I decided to continue in the vein of telling big stories.

Tonight I want to tell the story of a bodhisattva named Vimalakīrti. Bodhisattva is the Sanskrit word for a being who's committed to the service and care of all. Bodhi means awakened and sattva means being—somebody who's fostering well-being and awakening for beings everywhere.

I want to tell it because it's just about winter solstice in a couple of nights. All around the world and culture, certainly in the northern hemisphere, there are festivals of light. There's Hanukkah and there's Christmas and there's Kwanzaa and all kinds of other festivals. And often they're also mythological. In fact, there are lots of myths—virgin births and kings coming in from the desert and children being born in mangers, people who can then grow up and walk on water, loaves and fishes multiplying. It's a time of something bigger than just our ordinary way of seeing things.

I remember being at the top of Mount Tam some years ago when there was a transit of the planet Venus across the face of the sun. There were a number of people up there with some really big telescopes, and I loved looking in the biggest one. There was the fiery ball of the sun—you could see all the fiery plumes. And there was this little dark round marble that over the course of a couple of hours slowly moved across the face of this great glowing sun star. It was pretty small, just about the size of the earth. I had this feeling that like that one going around, we're on another one of those going around, taking our ride. And it's actually pretty small compared to the vastness of our star, not to speak of the whole solar system.

There's something about the turning of the seasons and the winter solstice that's an invitation to vastness—an invitation where the question is not just the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity, that there's something timeless.

I remember being a kid and lying down on the grass on a starry night. It was a fun thing to do, looking at the stars. But I would imagine that I was on the bottom of the earth, stuck on like a magnet—because it is; gravity is a magnet—and that I was looking down into the sea of stars. It gave a little kind of excitement to it, you know, not falling down into it. But here we are on this little blue-green globe circling the sun, and there's something really mysterious that's asked of us to awaken to.

So this story about Vimalakīrti, who is a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas basically make the vow to serve or to awaken all beings. If you're in a Zen center, every time you sit, you get in the proper posture and you often begin: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all." And then you meditate. Your meditation is to serve them all.

Now there's a little problem you may notice, and that is even if you take such a vow, the sentient beings you live with, for example, don't want to be saved by you. You may have noticed that. So it has to have some other meaning than that.

And here's the Dalai Lama's vow. He wakes up in the morning and in his morning prayers, from Shantideva: "May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for all beings to cross the flood. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be food for the hungry. May I be

medicine for all who are sick. May I be a lamp in the darkness for those who are lost. And may I do so as long as earth and sky and galaxies exist. Until all are enlightened, I vow to be here to serve them all." Some little vow like that.

But you can hear in this an imagination of what's possible for us as human beings—something a lot bigger than your to-do list, or holiday shopping, all of which are totally fine. But the turning of the season says there's something bigger: this mystery that we've been born into as a human being, your human incarnation, to pay attention to.

This particular teaching from the text of Vimalakīrti is a Mahayana sutra, and it's filled with story and humor and satire and poetry and magic and wisdom. It has a whole mythological side to it. Mahayana, especially these kind of Zen texts, is a little bit of a reaction to the rigidity that had grown in Buddhist teachings over some centuries—the lists of the three characteristics and the four noble truths and the five spiritual faculties and the six perfections and the seven factors of enlightenment.

Everybody trying to do things cookie cutter to get enlightened, the Eightfold Path. And it's sort of like when Bob Dylan picked up an electric guitar and said, forget that folk stuff—we're going to do it straight out and direct. The Mahayana texts, in some way, said the same thing. Zen says, you don't need those lists. We're going to have a whole different set of teachings that's vast and bigger and opens your mind in ways that have gotten rigid over these past centuries. And we want to offer the highest possible teachings. And in a way, they are, as you'll hear—they're tremendously imaginative.

You might say, well, what good is imagination? Robert Desnos was a celebrated French poet who joined the resistance during the Nazi occupation, worked underground for a long time, and then finally was captured and sent to the concentration camps. One day, he was sent first to a kind of collection point before being transported to one of the camps where people were being killed, where they were being gassed. Desnos and a whole group of others who'd been gathered up—former resistance fighters and so forth—were put in the back of a big truck and taken over to one of these concentration camps.

They all got out of the truck. People were, as you can imagine, already tired and emaciated, but now facing death—terribly bewildered and shocked. And Desnos kind of pushed his way to the front of the line. He grabbed the hand of the man in front and looked at it and said, "Wow, I'm so excited for you. You're going to live a long life. I can see it. You're going to have three more children, a beautiful wife, wealth—so fantastic,

so wonderful!" He grabbed another person's hand and started reading their palm and talking about all these things that were possible, that were going to happen. And another and another.

The guards got kind of confused. Who is this guy at the front of the line reading palms? Then he turned around and started reading the palms of the guards. "When this war is over, you're going to have a big farm and you're going to have all these things." And he went on and on. Pretty soon everybody was smiling. This was not what was expected. They had all thought they were going to their death. Even the guards got confused. By the time he finished reading their palms, they said, "Yeah, yeah, get back in your truck. You go back." And they didn't end up going into the gas chamber or wherever they were supposed to go.

Everybody was astonished. Basically, when you're in trouble, do something really strange. It can help you. But it also says something about imagination—that even in the most difficult times, it's possible to see something much bigger. If we could take the roof off this hall—blow the clouds away and see all the stars—that's what you want in a temple, actually.

We need to be able to envision another world, a world that's not ruled as much by greed or hatred or fear. A world that doesn't have the kind of injustice and inequality and continuing racism, the difficulties and dangers of climate change and so forth. And it won't change unless we can envision this. We have to envision that this is possible for us as humans—and it is.

We have all this outer technology that's developed. Who would have imagined that you could have the Great Library of Alexandria in your pocket, along with 2.7 million cat videos? And at the same time, the outer developments of technology now have to be matched by inner development of humanity. "We're a nation of nuclear giants and ethical infants," said the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And so that's the big task for us—to imagine another way of being.

So, once upon a time, when you were somewhat younger than you are now, the Buddha was teaching in Vaisali, in the garden of Ambapali, attended by a gathering of 8,000 monks and nuns, all who were enlightened. They were calm and dignified like royal elephants, and surrounding them were 32,000 bodhisattvas, spiritual healers from all the great traditions and worlds. When they had all gathered there and the Buddha was expounding the teachings of the compassionate heart in every circumstance and liberation, the Licchavis, one of the groups that lived in that area, arrived with their greatest bodhisattva, Ratnakara, and 500 youth behind him—all these young people, each holding a parasol made of seven kinds of jewels. They approached the

Buddha and bowed down and asked for teachings after circling a few times. When these parasols were laid down, then by the miraculous power of the Buddha, they were transformed into a single parasol, a canopy so great that it formed the covering of

for a billion galaxies—quite large. And the surface of this billion-galaxy universe was reflected in the interior of this precious canopy, where the total contents of the cosmos could be seen: limitless mansions of suns and moons and stellar bodies, and every kind of being that exists across the universe. That was the vision and power of the Buddha.

So you can see we're not in regular time anymore here.

And then the Licchavi Ratnakara said, "Pure are your eyes and pure is your thought, immeasurable is your virtue." All that the Buddha sees can be seen with the eyes of holiness, can be seen with beauty. And so the image of surrounding the universe with this parasol of jewels is really to see that there's beauty everywhere around us.

Thomas Merton—if you go into the center of Louisville, Kentucky, there's a placard at 4th Street that celebrates a passage where Thomas Merton came out of years as a Christian contemplative and was walking down the street, and then had this revelation that everyone he passed, he said, was shining like the sun. He said, "I could see a secret beauty born in them, behind every eye, that is inviolable and untouchable." And he said, "The only problem with seeing this way is that you want to fall down and worship each one as they go by."

You know, there are all these roadside billboards and signs and national historic markers. This is the only historic marker I know for a mystical experience in the U.S. But it's like Allen Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl," where he says, "Holy, holy, holy, the world is holy. This whole world holy, the skyscrapers and the pavements and the cafeteria filled with the millions holy, the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets"—all of it is holy. He has this vision of the sacredness of life under this great canopy.

So this is where the teaching begins. And the thing is that we do know this in some way. I can remember coming out of a long retreat, or finishing some study with a remarkable shaman, Don Jose Rios, who was at that time 103 years old. He was one of the great shamans of the Huichol Indians, of the Huichol Sierras of Mexico. And I did some peyote ceremonies with him. We'd sit up all night and shake our rattles and trip out—whatever—and do our chanting. And then I became a redwood tree and I became a salmon and so forth. And I remember the morning when the sun rose, that everything sparkled like it was a jewel.

And you all know this. This isn't just something that's fictional or drug-induced. It's the reality. We live in this mystery that's shining. It's what Thomas Merton saw. He said, "There I was in the monastery looking for that which is holy, and I needed to walk down the shopping street in Louisville, and then I saw it."

And that's really what it means, in the turning of the seasons, to see with a different kind of light.

So here's the Buddha offering his teachings. And then, under this great parasol where we can see the beauty of life as it is, that we participate in—then what happens is the Buddha hears that a certain bodhisattva named Vimalakirti, who is a lay person, not a monk or nun, is ill. And he wants to send all the great enlightened disciples to go and take care of him. This is one of the tasks of someone who awakens: that you care for the world and you care for those who need care.

So he turns to all the enlightened ones around him and says, "Would you go and attend to Vimalakirti and see what he needs, on my behalf?" Because what we know is that he's a remarkable being. He's a lay person who lives with the pure heart of a monastic. He appears to be adorned with ornaments, yet he's endowed with the simplicity of a hermit. He seems to eat and drink, and yet his nourishment really comes from the heart of meditation. And yet he's willing to enter the world to bring the spirit of love to every corner of the universe.

And so he's decided to live his life as a lay person. He goes into the casinos and teaches people about not being caught in attachment—that's the realm of the hungry ghost known as Las Vegas. He goes into the cabarets and into the bordellos and teaches people about sacred connection. He demonstrates freedom, and he's not afraid to go anywhere.

But he's ill now, so you have to go and take care of him.

And it goes on to say that he deliberately made himself ill so that others would come and take care of him. And I remember—I don't know how many of you saw the Mr. Rogers movie, but if you didn't see it, it's really kind of wonderful.

And I had mistakenly said the other day that Mr. Rogers had said something, but it turns out it was Mr. Rogers' mother who had said this. She said to him, when there's a tragedy or a difficulty in this world—an earthquake, a tsunami, a hurricane as they had in Houston—don't pay attention to the suffering so much. I mean, we need to, but instead look for the helpers.

And there you are, whether it's an earthquake or whether it's the fires or whatever, and you start to see people rushing in from every side—the firefighters and the medical people. In Texas, it was the people in their airboats coming from Louisiana and Mississippi saying, "We will go and get the people who are on the roofs, we'll get the people whose pets are lost." And there's this outpouring of love that happens when we're in trouble.

And this is Vimalakirti deliberately making himself appear sick so that he constellates or brings forth the love that's there, and then he can teach people. Part of what's true about this is that Vimalakirti is deliberately turning himself toward that which is difficult.

Anybody in this room not have difficulties? Please raise your hand. You can have your fifteen dollars back, right? It's part of human incarnation. It's part of what we are. And so we can either run from it or we can turn toward it—turn toward it in a way that in some fashion ennobles us.

This is from Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim. He says, "The person who's really on the way, when they fall upon hard times in the world, will not as a consequence turn to those friends who offer refuge and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they'll seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themself over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

And so if one wants to discover the great heart of compassion—to break the heart open, really—if one wants to discover your own dignity and courage, instead of running away or being in denial, which our culture fancies is a good way to deal with stuff in the world, you actually turn toward it in your own life, and you trust that your heart is big enough to hold it all.

When I teach, I sometimes carry this picture. This is Vedran Smailović, who was the cellist of Sarajevo during the Balkan War when Bosnia and Serbia and Croatia were at war. Sarajevo was besieged for three years—a beautiful city. There was mortar fire and rockets. No one could get in and out except some UN helicopters, and people would be killed by the mortar fire.

Vedran, who was a cellist in the National Symphony, would put on his tux, take a little folding chair, and the next day go out to where the mortar had struck, and he would play this beautiful music so the people of the city wouldn't give up hope. This picture is him playing in the bombed-out National Library of Sarajevo.

So what do we do in these times? And I think about it, and I guess I have to get real with you. Trudy, my beloved Trudy, and I went down to Tijuana to visit some of the two largest migrant shelters there, to bring clothes and things that people could use. We went partly because one of the teachers she'd trained at Spirit Rock ran meditation groups there, for both the men's shelter and women's shelter.

In the best of the shelters, they also helped some of the men get work, even temporary work in Tijuana. They had wraparound services—legal services and health services and planning for what would happen if you do cross the border or if you don't. Here are your possibilities, and here's some work you can do for the couple of months that you can stay here. It was amazing. There was a sense of dignity and empowerment because they were being treated respectfully.

But here's the tough poem, written just a few days ago, by Gustavo Barahona-López:

Every day I open class with a morning circle. Nineteen seven- and eight-year-olds sit on a colorful rug, talk about their favorite color, ideal superpowers, how they feel, or who they'll be when they grow up.

At recess, I read about a seven-year-old who died in border control custody after navigating the New Mexican desert. Her name is Jakelin Caal Maquín.

I begin to wonder, did she make walking through the desert a game? Count the number of cacti? Make messages with stones in the sand? I wonder if she went to school. Did she have to leave midway through the year to work the strawberry fields or water the donkeys like my father?

I imagine her in my classroom. Would she color desert sunrises, or would the deep sunset reds and oranges be her inspiration? I wonder if she knew where she was going. What was America to her?

I wonder if she spoke K'iche' or English or Spanish or Mom. I wonder if she knew her times tables. What is 15,000 children times two parents in a different detention facility? My students know any number of bottles of water times border patrol equals zero. Did she know the definition of terror, or did she call it fear? The not knowing tears. Who was she? Who would she have become? Who have we lost?

I read this poem because these are our children. And not just to have an emotional moment, but actually to say: if you were to reflect for her—whatever your politics, whatever your point of view about immigration—the reality is that there are these people in this circumstance. The international governments around the world, with 70 million refugees, have not really dealt with it.

And if you could do something in these next weeks, one small gesture—to give something, to call your representative, whatever it happens to be—if you could do one little thing as a gift to those children, or to those who are in that bardo in between things, why not do that as part of the things you do in this turning of the year? Really think about it. What would that be?

Because we get insulated, and we also get overwhelmed because there's so much. What do we do? Climate change. What do we do? Syria. What do we do? Darfur is still happening. What do we do about homelessness? They almost want you to feel like you can't do anything. It's a lie. It's completely untrue. You have agency, you have gifts, and you have the capacity to reach your hand out and mend some part of the world. And I don't think anything else really satisfies our soul as much as that.

So here we are with Vimalakirti, and he decides to make himself sick after going to the bordellos and the casinos and everything else, and bring all those healers together. But when he makes himself sick, he also gives them teachings about how it's all a dream. Now, when you're sick, it doesn't feel like a dream. It feels like a bad dream, right? It's not like a star at dawn and a flash of lightning in a summer cloud. But yet he offers a teaching that says: who are we really?

I was recently with Ram Dass in Hawaii, teaching together. Ram Dass is now 87, in a wheelchair. Trudy and I went to join him and Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, our dear friends. And Ram Dass mostly teaches love now. He says, "I love everything. I love you and you and you. I love the whole group, every single one of you, and your children and your parents, however they treated you. I still love them."

On his big altar where he has Quan Yin and the Buddha and Mother Mary and his Maharaji, his guru, and Gandhi and a hundred other figures—he also used to have Dick Cheney in the middle. Now the image has been replaced by Donald Trump. And he says, "Of course I love..." He said, "I love the walls and the ceilings and the lights and the shoes that are out there. In fact, I love this dirty carpet." Somebody, one of his students, got a piece of that dirty carpet and put it in a gold frame and sent it to him saying, "Put this on your altar"—which he did, next to the picture of his guru.

Anyway, we were sitting with Ram Dass and Trudy asked him, "Are you in much pain these days?" Knowing that it was pretty much so. He's been in a wheelchair for 20 years, and there's been a different kind of infection. "Yeah, my feet," he said. "This is going on." And she knew that. "And how about here? Do you have pain there?" "Oh, yeah."

And then he paused for a minute, looked up, smiled this kind of amazing smile, and he said, "I love my pain." And it wasn't a masochistic kind of thing at all. It was just like, "I love life, I love everything." And there's this kind of field around him that says who you are is not your body.

As Thich Nhat Hanh said—and he's ninety years old in his wheelchair after a stroke—"This body is not me." You can honor it and love it and care for it, but I'm not limited by this body. I'm life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Look at the sky and the ocean filled with stars. Since before time, I am them. I've been free. Birth and death are only doors open, through which our spirits pass sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are the game of hide and seek. Come and hold my hand and we'll meet again and again in this dance.

So this is where Vimalakirti is coming from. All these people are visiting him sick and he's giving a whole different level of teachings. And it's very playful the way he teaches. But this group of enlightened disciples of the Buddha don't want to go visit Vimalakirti because he's given them a hard time every time they go and talk with him. They'll sit with him and he'll ask them for their teachings. They'll tell him beautiful teachings and he'll say, "Well, not quite right." And then he'll correct them and say, "This is still kind of dualistic."

So I'll give you an example. Ananda, the Buddha's beloved attendant and one of the people that in the stories is supposed to be the most kind-hearted person—the Buddha himself had gotten sick and it seemed that going out and getting some milk would be a good thing to help him. So Ananda goes out with his alms bowl, and in some cases, if you're asked by householders, "Is there anything I can offer you?" Ananda would say, "Yes, you could give me some milk for the Blessed One."

So he goes through the town and Vimalakirti sees him and says, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm out to get milk for the Buddha who has an illness and I think it will help." And Vimalakirti says, "An illness? Reverend Ananda, the body of the Buddha is like diamonds. It's beyond good and evil, beyond sick and well. How could disease or discomfort touch such an awakened one? You insult him by going out for milk. You have to understand true liberation is not bound by these small concepts of body and healing and sickness. That's all duality." Vimalakirti is a non-dual kind of guy.

And Ananda shrinks back and says, "All right, I take your point, but what am I to do? It may all be non-dual, but what am I to do?" And Vimalakirti goes on, he says, "The Buddha is like the vast sky and the shining stars. How could you get milk for that? You don't understand what you're doing in this world."

Ananda feels confused and sad, and then all of a sudden the Buddha in his mind hears this conversation, and he says, "Ananda, the householder Vimalakirti speaks to you of deep truth, yes. Nevertheless, since the Buddha has appeared in this time as a human being, with the difficulties that humans have, he teaches the world by acting lowly and humble. And therefore, Ananda, do not be ashamed and go and get me some milk."

And what you can hear in this, it's actually quite playful. The whole thing is playful. Like, what level do you want to dance on? You know, as Ram Dass likes to say, you need to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number. And you kind of have to have them both in your heart at the same time.

And I remember, there were some big demonstrations during Occupy that happened in Oakland. And our dear friends, our sister-brother meditation center, the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland—which is the single most diverse dharma center I know on the planet, it's really quite wonderful and amazing—anyway, they were close to downtown. And so they were out there with everybody at Occupy.

And because it was all happening, there was also some concern about—how shall we say it—the inequalities of our current financial system. There were demonstrators at some of the big banks, and the banks closed their doors during the demonstrations. The people inside were still on site doing their work, but the doors were closed—though it's all glass there.

So they went outside the bank, the closest big bank to them, and they got a big stack of one dollar bills. They stood by the door of the bank and started giving money to everybody who walked up. Just to mess with the minds of the people inside the bank. "You've come to the bank for money? Here, we should share it."

This is a little bit of the spirit of Vimalakirti. He basically messes with you until you go, "Okay, I surrender. I see that there's something bigger that I have to pay attention to." And you can be playful with it as well.

So they go to see Vimalakirti—or they're about to go see him; they haven't even gone there yet. One of them asks, "Where does he reside and how does he sit?" And they describe the kind of seat that Vimalakirti takes, but the passage I love most is where

Vimalakirti sits on the seat of love—because it expands to all beings. He rises up from the seat of love and exudes or distributes the qualities of love to all that he touches. He sits on the seat of love.

Here we are, coming to practice together as we do, and the invitation is to sit with loving awareness and attend to your own breath, to the emotions that arise—your sadness and your joy and your longing and your love—to attend to the way your mind makes stories, and then to come back and live in the reality of the present more fully, not so lost in those stories, so that you can be here for the person in front of you and the way that you drive and the things you tend in your work and the things you care about in the world, including yourself.

What is your seat? Is it a seat of love?

Here you learn these trainings, not just for yourself, but also to see what it means to live with an awakened heart.

Someone who sits here wrote me a story about a shipyard he works with in Seattle. Typically there are 700 people working at the yard. Twice a week he leads a group sit where anyone in the yard and the company can meditate, followed by a talking stick check-in circle. Racial and gender issues are being addressed. Now many of the trades start their shift with a short meditation and check-in. There are trees being planted in what was a desolate yard. It's spotless. It feels alive. Today it's a much safer place to work, and as you might expect, more profitable since they've implemented this whole human dharma approach. All of this has taken place since last year, only by bringing a few of the seeds that he learned here on retreat.

I find it a really beautiful story. What it says is that when you plant beautiful seeds, as Vimalakirti teaches, the world responds. I think it was Thoreau who said, "Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect miracles"—because this is how it works. The seeds we plant and water are what will grow.

Some of you know that Denis Mukwege was a physician who gave a speech to the UN decrying the horror of mass rape in Congo. He'd been tending a clinic for women who'd been raped and women with all kinds of other medical problems for quite a long time. Because Congo is in such conflict, at some point after he came to the UN, gunmen invaded his home and threatened to kill him and his wife and daughters. He had guards who stopped them. He left the Congo shortly thereafter.

And the poor women who lived all around the clinic sold their harvest and bought him a plane ticket to come back. They said, "You've made our life livable and bearable. We know that you feel you're in danger. We will do what we can to protect you. We're going to give of the little bit that we have, all of us, to make sure that you're part of our community."

It says something like this in the text: if you live on the seat of love and if you plant those seeds, it's not just you—something really mysterious happens in the world around you. And this is quite possible for all of us.

So then they do go to visit Vimalakirti to console the invalid, as it's said.

And one of the greatest of the disciples, Manjushri, goes and asks Vimalakirti where he's been. And Vimalakirti says, "Well, I've been everywhere—to the hell realms and the realm of the jealous gods." That's, by the way, Washington, D.C. The hell realms, I'm sorry to say, are in Darfur and Syria, but some other places that we know that are closer as well. "I've been to all of those places."

And they come in, and then one of the great enlightened monks around the Buddha—but these are all foils in this story—one of his wisest disciples, Sariputra, comes in and says, "Where can we sit? There are no chairs." And Vimalakirti looks at him, sort of teasing him, and says, "Where did I get the chairs? Did you come here for the sake of the Dharma, or did you come for the sake of a chair? What are you looking for?" And Sariputra says, "Of course, the Dharma." Again, there's this sort of little back and forth.

And then Vimalakirti says, "Well, where are the best chairs in the great galaxies?" And one of the disciples said, "Oh, this Buddha who lives over there has magnificent thrones that are 84,000 feet high and they're covered with jewels and lotuses and peacock feathers and all these things." And he says, "Let there be chairs." And then by his own magic, the room expands so that 100,000 enlightened beings from all the galaxies gather and sit in those chairs, along with a few chairs for the guests who've arrived.

So again, it really speaks to the possibility of imagination but also the generosity of spirit. You may not have anything, but if you open your mind and your heart when someone comes in, that makes the magic. It doesn't matter if they sit on the floor if the heart and mind is open—people sit in the midst of something that's beautiful and magnificent.

And then the room expands to an inconceivably large size and all these hundreds of thousands of enlightened beings on these vast thrones are seated around watching the dialogue. And then Vimalakirti is saying, "This is nothing." He goes on: "Reverend Sariputra, the bodhisattva who lives in inconceivable liberation, the liberation of all beings,

can pour into a single pore of his skin all the waters of the four great oceans without injuring the water animals such as fish, tortoises, crocodiles, frogs, and other creatures—without them even being aware of a problem. The whole operation is visible without any injury or disturbance to the frogs and the alligators and all such creatures. Now, such a bodhisattva can reach his right hand and pick up a whole galaxy like this and open it for you to see and understand, and bring illumination to all the beings that are there."

So this is the kind of story that it is. And Sariputra says, "Okay, I see that you're someone of some great attainment. But why is this? What is this teaching us?"

A poem from Mary Oliver:

What can I say that I've not said before?
So I'll say it again.
The leaf has a song in it.
Stone is the face of patience.
Inside the river there's an unfinished story,
and you are somewhere in it,
and it will never end until all ends.
Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce,
but take it also to the forest and the hills.
The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child
is singing still.

I am of years lived, so far seventy-four, and the leaf is still singing.

And so she's speaking to the mystery that Vimalakirti is teaching—that when you see rightly, as the poet Hafiz says, the leaves on the trees become like pages in the holy books. And you don't have to look any further than where you are to see that which is sacred and mysterious.

I mean, how did we get into this human life? You think you're your body? Come on. It changes. You have to take care of it. You rent it like Avis—you've got to turn it in at some point. But yes, you use it. But it's not who we are. There's a spirit that was born into you. And that will leave your body when you die. You'll see. You wait. Float out of your body. Light. All that stuff.

It happens to be true. You don't have to believe me. But when it happens, remember I told you. You're not just this body. And you're not just the conditioning of your culture or your parents. I mean, those are really small potatoes. Yes, they can make a lot of suf-

fering in different ways when we believe them. But Vimalakirti is saying, don't believe that. Believe something so much greater and more magnificent about who you are and what this world is, and see it everywhere that you look.

So then, two more things, and then we do our little ritual.

A goddess who lives in the house there, another enlightened being, comes down to listen. Sariputra said, "How long have you been here?" And she says, "Timeless. I've been with Vimalakirti since the beginning." And then Sariputra says, "Well, you know, I'm glad that you're here. Have you received anything of benefit?" And she said, "Oh, he gives awakening blessings to everyone." And then Sariputra says, "But then why are you still in a woman's body? I mean, don't you have to be a man to be fully awakened?" There is that teaching, you know, in some Buddhist things.

And I remember Dipa Ma, who was this great woman, yogi and master that I studied with, quite an extraordinary being who'd mastered all the realms of meditation and compassion, loving kindness. She just was love. But she also had tremendous power. And her teacher, Munindra, who was also a teacher of mine, they were together at some point. And I mean, she was the kind of person... I never saw it. I kept wanting her to do something magic because her teacher said, "Oh yeah, I've seen her walk through walls. I've seen her appear and disappear." Do all these things that one reads about.

Anyway, at one point he was teaching and he said, "But you have to be a man to become a Buddha. You have to do that in a male body." And Dipa Ma said, "Yeah, I can do anything a man can do. So be quiet." And it was really true. You could feel it.

So in this text, Sariputra is talking to her, and the goddess comes and she covers his body with flower petals. She says, "Here, Sariputra." And he says, "Wait, I'm a monk. I shouldn't have these flower petals." And she says, "You're so caught up on what's pure and what's impure."

And I guess I'll read you a version not in the original text, by my old friend Rick Fields, called "The Short Sutra on the Meeting of the Buddha and the Goddess." I read it because it's somehow a combination of something way beyond me too. This is women's liberation on steroids, let us say.

Thus I have heard: the Buddha was walking along the forest path, walking without arriving anywhere or any thought of arriving, and lotuses shining with morning dew miraculously appeared under every step, soft as silk between the toes of the Buddha, when suddenly out of the turquoise sky, dancing in front of his half-shut inward-looking eyes, shimmering like a rainbow or a spider's web, transparent as the dew on a lotus flower, the goddess appeared, quivering like a hummingbird in the air before him.

She, for she was surely as she as the Buddha could see clearly with his eye of discriminating wisdom, was mostly red in color, though when the light shifted she flashed like a rainbow. She was naked except for the usual flower ornaments goddesses wear. Her long hair was deep blue, her two eyes fathomless pits of space, and her third eye a ring of fire.

The Buddha folded his hands together and greeted the goddess thus: "Oh goddess, why are you blocking my path? Before I saw you I was happily going nowhere, and now I'm not sure where to go."

"You can go around me," said the goddess, twirling on her heels like a bird darting away, but just a little away. "Or you can come after me. This is my forest too, and you can't pretend I'm not here."

With that, the Buddha sat, supple as a snake, solid as a rock, beneath a Bodhi tree that sprang full leaf to shade him. "Perhaps we should have a chat," he said. "After years of arduous practice at the time of the morning star,

I penetrated reality.

And now—not so fast, Buddha. *I* am reality.

The earth stood still. The oceans paused. The wind itself listened. And a thousand, thousand Arhats, Bodhisattvas, and Dakinis magically appeared to hear what would happen in their conversation.

"I know I take my life in my hands," said the Buddha, "but I am known as the fearless one, so here goes."

And he and the goddess, without further words, exchanged glances. Light rays like sunbeams shot forth so bright that even Sariputra, the all-seeing one, had to turn away. And then they exchanged thoughts, and the illumination was bright as a diamond candle. And then they exchanged mind, and there was a great silence as vast as the universe that contains everything. And then they exchanged bodies and clothes, and the Buddha arose as the goddess, and the goddess arose as the Buddha, and so on back and forth for one hundred thousand kalpas of time.

If you meet the Buddha, you meet the goddess. If you meet the goddess, you meet the Buddha. Not only that—the Buddha *is* the goddess, and the goddess is the awakened one. And not only that—the Buddha is emptiness, and the goddess is bliss. The goddess is emptiness, and the Buddha is bliss. And this is what and what not you are, and it is true.

There was a similar dialogue in the sutra between the goddess and Sariputra, where she switched bodies with him. He was a little more reluctant than the Buddha in this version, but she did that same bit of a dance. And what it shows in the deepest way is that all our ideas of purity and impurity, all the judgments of the heart, all the notions of who's better and who's worse—all those evaluations are really a limitation. It's possible instead to live with the eyes of love, to see every being you meet as the Buddha, some of them just a little more caught in delusion.

As Ram Dass says, he's put a variety of pictures in the middle of his altar. I do my loving-kindness practice, and I picture some of the despots of the world, and I include them, saying: May you be free from hatred. May you be free from fear. May you be free from delusion. May you too awaken the heart of love. And I can wish that for anybody. I can wish that for anybody.

This text invites us to live in a different reality—and also to *see* this reality wherever we go, because people are serving one another constantly. Even as we do this talk, there have been a million, ten million acts of goodness in the Bay Area. People cooking grilled cheese sandwiches for their children who really didn't want to eat the broccoli. People stopping at red lights so you can safely pass through the green. People standing in line at the market in a civilized way so that others who arrived before them can be served first. We do this all the time. And we tend to focus on what's problematic.

Here's a poem by Laszlo Slomowicz:

A man is running hard to catch the bus that just left. It's picking up speed but he pulls even—ha!—running, and wraps on its side, and a woman by the window yells to the driver, who stops and opens the accordion door. But the man does not get on. He points back to an old woman who's not run a step in a very long time, shuffling toward the bus. Nor does he leave until he's helped her up both steps, and then walks back slowly, still breathing hard from the fast run, toward us who are waiting for a different bus. What can a group of strangers like us do at a time like this? A time in its own way like when Jesse Owens roared by them all in the Olympics and everyone stood in the stadium and applauded.

Gestures like that happen all the time from people. This is how we can live. And this is really what Vimalakirti points to.

Again from Mary Oliver:

I think of the Buddha's last day. Every morning as the east begins to tear off its many clouds of darkness and send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet and green—an old man, he laid down between two sal trees. He might have said anything, knowing it was his final hour.

The light burns upward and settles over the field. Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen. No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his vast and difficult life. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head and looked into the face of that expectant crowd. "Make of yourself a light," he said as his last words. Make of yourself a light.

I've never told this story in this way in a teaching before, and I'm not quite sure if it fits at this time, but I hope so. I enjoyed doing it. And I think at the very best, when we had our little break and you remembered something beautiful, the turning of the seasons and the beginning of a new year does get us to stop and listen and look anew—and perhaps look inside at what matters, and live in a fiercer and more illuminated way.

This is quite optional, but I'll tell you what we're going to do with these red cords. Oh, I forgot to say—at the end of the Vimalakirti Sutra, Sariputra is sitting there and he's thinking, "Now, how are you going to feed all these people?" And Vimalakirti looks at him and says, "You mean you came here for teachings and now you're worried about what's for dinner?"

But this is what the mind will do. I love this moment in the text because I know everybody who comes on retreat, at some point they'll be sitting and some amazing or difficult thing will be happening, and they'll think, "I wonder what they're going to serve for lunch"—because the mind has no pride. And the text really illuminates this.

So, if one is to become a bodhisattva—and that of course is your own choice—one of the things that is part of it is to make a vow or set an intention. And my favorite modern bodhisattva vow comes from Diane Ackerman. She writes: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

Not bad for a little bodhisattva vow.

So what I want you to do, before we do this blessing cord, is reflect for a minute on this night. It's not a New Year's resolution, but something in a way deeper than that. If you were to set the compass of your heart and say, "What is it that really matters in the

way that I live?"—what would that intention or vow be this evening? And it could be very simple. It doesn't have to be a long poem. It might be as simple as, "I vow to be kind."

Take a moment to quiet and reflect. What would it be? For one often comes into the temple to reset the compass of the heart, to remind yourself. It's all a reminder, really, of what you know most deeply.

And now, having reflected on it, if you have a little piece of paper, write it down—or borrow a piece of paper or pen from somebody near you, or put it in your phone. It helps to do that. And this beautiful goddess of compassion, Kuan Yin, she'll put it in her phone too. There you go. She's listening to the cries of the world through social media and setting her vow. So write it down if you can, in any way that works for you.

And now, having written down the next step—there are two more steps—I'd invite you, if you're comfortable, very quietly and without ancillary conversation, without talking about it, to turn to a person sitting near you and listen to them tell you, or read to you, what their intention is. And then when they're quiet, you tell yours to them. It's a beautiful thing to hear it. And again, by writing it and speaking it, it comes more alive in the heart. So go ahead and do it—not a conversation, but a quiet listening. Two people, or if you need three, if it's more convenient. Each person talks, and then the other talks.

silence

Kind of sweet, isn't it? To hear that. It's not the kind of conversation we usually have. In the Sufi tradition it's called the sobat—a conversation of the heart. To listen to somebody's intention really respectfully, and then to allow your own to be revealed to someone else.

So now, having done that, we get to make our blessing protection cords.

Let me say something for those of you who might be unfamiliar. And again, this is completely optional. We're using a cord or a string which is part of the rituals used across Buddhist Asia, all the way from Afghanistan to Japan and Southeast Asia and beyond. It's used in weddings and in healing and blessings and all kinds of things, and for protection. The reason it's this red color is it's considered to be one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun. I have one from the Dalai Lama.

So you wear your robes into the marketplace. Someone said you're basically a monk or a nun in drag—your real home is the temple, but you're in the marketplace like Vimalakirti, carrying the illuminated heart with you.

I did this with a famous Tibetan lama many years ago. Somebody raised their hand and said, "These are called protection cords. What do they protect you from?" And he said, "Why, yourself, of course—the main protection that people need."

So we need to tie three knots in them to finish tonight. Hold it up.

The first knot is the knot of refuge. For some in the Buddhist tradition, it will be refuge in the Buddha—to see the Buddha in every being you meet. Refuge in dharma, which means the truth—to speak the truth and see what's true and honor it in this life. Refuge in sangha, the community—the recognition that we can't do it alone, that we're interwoven in the field of life.

But for you, it may be the sacred in any other form. It might be religious or non-religious, but hold your cord and reflect: What is your deep refuge for yourself that's holy or sacred, that you trust to turn to, to illuminate? And when you're clear on your refuge, when you take that refuge, then tie a knot in the cord—to see every being as potential Buddha in front of you, or however you manifest your refuge. To take refuge in that which is sacred.

Knot number two is the knot of compassion. As you hold your cord, reflect on the teachings of non-harming—that we can move through this world, and if we dedicate ourselves to compassion for ourselves and others, then in word and deed we can act and speak in ways that foster wellbeing and harmony for ourselves and others, and avoid those actions that cause harm.

So reflect on a dedication to compassion. The world so longs for it. A care for all beings. Compassion is more than empathy—it's the movement of the heart to care for yourself and others, to alleviate suffering and bring wellbeing. And in whatever way you find yourself drawn to make a vow, an intention, of living with a compassionate heart to care for living beings, tie the second knot in the cord—to refrain from causing harm. And already this gives you dignity and liberty and joy and awakening to do so.

And then the final knot is what you just spoke to another, what you wrote—the intention or the vow, the sacred intention that you made coming to the temple tonight. Remembering what you intended and what you spoke and wrote, tie the third knot in the cord, which symbolizes your commitment to this intention.

And now your blessing protection cord is fully activated. If you would like to wear it, even for a little while, you can either put it around the back of your neck and let it hang down—don't tie it on yet—or you can wrap it around your wrist two or three times and

let the two ends hang down. And then in a moment when we end, I'll invite someone sitting near you to tie yours on with a silent blessing, and you can do the same. But not quite yet.

So I want us just to sit for a minute or two in silence.

And with all the measure of tears in this world and the difficulties of human incarnation in individual and collective ways, and with all the unbearable beauty and magnificence of this world—you, oh nobly born, as the sutras begin, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones—remember the great heart of love and compassion that was born in you.

Trust it.

Rest in it.

Make of yourself a light.

So you can now turn to a person near you and they'll tie on your cord if you wish.

Drive safely out there. It's dark. Be polite on the roads—there are lots of people. Take the extra cookies if there are any left for your friends or children you run into. Come back to Spirit Rock in the new year, and go from the temple carrying something beautiful that's always been inside you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Good night.

CHAPTER 84

Healing and Liberation through Mindful Loving Awareness

Jack Kornfield · 1h10

> *In this rich and story-filled teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together the ancient wisdom of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta with contemporary stories of healing and transformation. He opens with a remarkable account of Yeshe Dunden, the Dalai Lama's physician, demonstrating profound listening at Yale Medical School—a story that illuminates what it means to truly receive another being with complete attention and care.*
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> *Kornfield guides practitioners through the four foundations of mindful loving awareness: the body, feelings, mind, and dhamma. He explores how we can bring non-judgmental attention to our physical experience, learning to hold both pleasure and pain with compassion rather than fear or dissociation. Moving through the territory of emotions, he emphasizes that liberation comes not from escaping our feelings but from expanding our capacity to hold the full range of human experience—the grief and joy, loneliness and connection, fear and love.*
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> *The teaching addresses how this same quality of deep listening applies to the body of the Earth, sharing Christiana Figueres' story of visiting Plum Village before the Paris Climate Accord and how the understanding of interdependence transformed international negotiations. Kornfield invites practitioners to recognize that their thoughts and stories, while powerful, are not their true identity—that resting in loving awareness itself offers freedom from the conditioned patterns of mind. The talk culminates in an invitation to remember our fundamental dignity and the freedom that can only be found within our own hearts.*

So please let yourself get settled again.

Sometimes I wonder—is this a big cocktail party, or is it actually that we need connection? I think the latter is true, and there's something kind of beautiful about it. Not to put down cocktails completely; there are places for parties. But when I actually listen and see and hear—because there are many people here whom I've seen in other months and other weeks and other years—there is something beautiful about feeling connection and community, whether you've just come and met someone or not. I appreciate that.

I'd like to share some teachings tonight, and perhaps some reflections as we go. For your part, you can take this as another form of meditation—a meditation of reflection or contemplation. If something in it seems valuable and rings true in your heart, beautiful, take that. And if it doesn't ring true, let it go. There's no quiz at the end, no grades or anything. It's really more a reminder, at best, of something that you already know.

Over the past few Monday nights this fall, I've been offering a series of teachings based on some big stories. Somehow I've become a storyteller. I've always loved stories, and it feels like a beautiful and fruitful way to teach. So I have at least one long story tonight, and maybe some others, to weave in for your reflection and understanding.

The theme tonight—going back to one I've taught in previous years—is healing, and in particular the quality of mindfulness, or mindful loving awareness, that brings both healing and liberation.

If you look at the texts, the great discourse on the path of mindfulness from the ancient Buddhist teachings begins: "My friends, there is a most wonderful way for living beings to realize purification, overcome directly grief and sorrow, end pain and anxiety, travel the path of awakening, and realize liberation. This is the establishment of mindfulness, of mindful loving awareness."

Established in four ways, a practitioner establishes mindful loving awareness in the body, in feelings, in thought and in the mind, and then in the dharma—in the principles that govern life. When you become mindful and aware of these dimensions of your human life, this becomes a gateway for your own wellbeing, happiness, liberation, joy, and of course, healing.

To set the tone for the story that will come shortly: when I was living in Southeast Asia for a number of years as a Buddhist monk, and also in the Peace Corps working on remote village tropical medicine teams, I went to South Vietnam during what we call the Vietnam War—what they call the American War, because they had a whole series of wars with the French, and we were one of them.

I went in part to visit a temple run by the Coconut Monk, as he was called, who lived primarily on coconuts. It was on an island in the Mekong Delta—an island of peace. He was a great peacemaker monk, and I wanted to learn from him and his community.

I took a boat through the Mekong Delta during a time of heavy fighting. You could see helicopter gunships and firefights on the horizon. The odd thing—for those of you who have experience being around war—is that it takes place here, and then in the next village, other people are shopping and doing what they need to do to keep their lives going, because we're human beings and we still have to live.

The boat pulled up to the dock and I went into the temple. The monks were wearing robes with a patch that showed a broken assault rifle, snapped in half. It said in half a dozen languages: "We will fight no more." It was a refuge in the middle of the war.

I paid my respects and found some of the teachings. At the far end of this island, there was a hill, and on top of it stood a very big statue of the Buddha—perhaps forty feet tall. Next to him was a forty-foot-tall statue of Jesus, and they had their arms around each other's shoulders.

And there were the helicopter gunships, and the battle in the distance. This was the place where young men who didn't want to enter the military would come and become monks in order to be peaceful. It was as if those two statues were standing there saying, "Hey, we're brothers in this, and there's another way to live in this world than what you see out there." It was really beautiful.

Both the Buddha and Jesus were known as great healers, great physicians—healers of body, healers of heart, and healers of spirit. Healing, and beyond healing—not just healing of the body, but healing of who we are as human beings together—comes first out of a capacity for deep listening, a sense of connection with life that lets us understand.

So here is the first story. It comes from Richard Selzer, a wonderful professor at the medical school at Yale University, who is also a beautiful essayist. I received a note from him a few years ago because I had read some of his stories in my talks, and he was grateful that I shared them. I felt honored to receive that note.

Here is his story:

On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work at Yale appeared an announcement. "Yeshe Dunden," it read, "will make rounds at six o'clock on June 10th." The particulars were then given, followed by a notation: "Yeshe Dunden is the personal physician to the Dalai Lama."

I am not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Not only might such an attitude be inimical to one's earthly well-being, it could take care of eternity as well. Thus, on the morning of June 10th, I joined the clutch of white coats waiting in the small conference room adjacent to the ward selected for rounds.

The air in the room was heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement. You can picture it.

At precisely six o'clock, he materialized—a short, golden, barrel-shaped man dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon. His scalp was shaven, and the only visible hair was a scanty black line above each hooded eye. He bowed in greeting while his young interpreter made the introduction.

Yeshe Dunden, we were told, would examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis was unknown to Yeshe Dunden, as it was to us. The examination would take place in our presence, after which we would reconvene in the conference room where Yeshe Dunden would discuss the case. We were further informed that for the past two hours, Yeshe Dunden had purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer.

I, having breakfasted well, performed only the most sultry of ablutions, and given no thought at all to my soul, glanced furtively at my fellows. Suddenly we seemed a soiled, uncouth lot.

The patient had been awakened early and told she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and had been asked to produce a fresh specimen of urine. So when we entered her room, the woman showed no surprise. She had long ago taken on that mixture of compliance and resignation that is the face of chronic illness. This was to be but another in an endless series of tests and examinations.

Yeshe Dunden stepped to the bedside while the rest of us stood apart, watching. For a long time, he gazed at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I too studied her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gave a clue to the nature of her disease.

At last he took her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bent over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes were closed as he felt for her pulse, and in a moment he had found the spot. For the next half hour he remained thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seemed to have been drawn down into this one purpose. It was palpation of the pulse raised to the state of high ritual.

From the foot of the bed where I stood, it was as though he and the patient had entered a special place of isolation, of apartness, about which a vacancy hovered and across which no violation was possible. After a moment, the woman rested back upon her pillow, and from time to time she raised her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sank back once more. I could not see their hands joined in a correspondence that was exclusive, intimate—his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offered at her wrist.

All at once I was envious—not of him, not of Yeshe Dunden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I wanted to be held like that, touched so, received. And I knew that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have not felt a single one.

At last, Yeshe Dunden straightened, gently placed the woman's hand upon the bed, and stepped back. The interpreter produced a small wooden bowl and two sticks. Yeshe Dunden poured a portion of the urine specimen into the bowl and proceeded to whip the liquid with the two sticks. This he did for several minutes until a foam was raised. Then, bowing above the bowl, he inhaled the odor three times. He set the bowl down and turned to leave. All this while he had not uttered a single word.

As he neared the door, the woman raised her head and called out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. "Thank you, doctor," she said, and touched with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshe Dunden turned back for a moment to gaze at her, then stepped into the corridor. Rounds were at an end.

We were seated once more in the conference room. Yeshe Dunden spoke now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds I had never heard before. He had barely begun when the young interpreter began to translate, the two voices in tandem—a bilingual fugue, one chasing the other, like the chanting of monks.

He spoke of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he said—the last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath.

Thus he spoke, and now we were silent.

"May we have the diagnosis?" a professor asked.

The host of these rounds, the one man who knew, answered: "Congenital heart disease. Interventricular septal defect with resultant heart failure."

A gateway in the heart, I think, that must not be opened. Through it charges the full waters that flood her breath.

So, here then is the doctor, listening to the sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf. He is more than doctor. He is priest. I know the doctor to the gods is pure, pure healing. The doctor to humans stumbles, most often wounds. Their patients must die, as

must they. But now and then it happens, as I make my own rounds, that I hear the sound of his voice like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining, and then a jubilation possesses me and I feel myself touched by something divine.

I had a chance to be with Yeshe Dunden some years ago when I was dealing with a neurological problem and got misdiagnosed, so it seemed way more serious than it turned out to be, fortunately. I went to see him. He took my pulses and looked at me, scanning, and I was in heaven. "Yeshe Dunden, fix me," you know. "I have a bad diagnosis"—that turned out not to be so. And he shook his head. He said, "It's not bad, really. Here, take these little pills." They sort of looked like rabbit droppings, basically—these little dark Tibetan medicine things. "Take these and do these meditations and you'll be fine." And somehow I felt much better even without taking that medicine, just seeing him.

But there's something in this story about our wish to be so held, so received, so respected as a human being by one another that I find inspiring and moving. And in fact, the whole world—the world itself, our family, our gardens, our co-workers, whatever the circumstances—the prisoners and the laborers and the guards and the co-workers and the managers and the parents and the teens and the grandparents, people actually do want to be received and understood and known.

And Yeshe Dunden in some ways shows the power of the listening heart, even in the face of the great reality of impermanence and suffering and illness and death—which it turns out is going to happen to you, by the way, if it hasn't yet. It's coming, really. I'm just giving you a little hint here. But it is. It's part of human incarnation. It's what's happened.

But in the same way, this also speaks to what it means to pay attention in a world that's riven by injustice and racism and conflict and climate difficulty. How do we listen to the pulse of the world? How do we listen to one another?

I remember sitting with a woman who was toward the end of her very painful chemotherapy. She had advanced metastatic cancer, and she said the chemo was like fire moving through her body. It was so painful. It was like being in hell. So I sat with her and held her hand for a while, and then I invited her to close her eyes as best she could and imagine somehow that the medicine coming through her was also purifying her, that it was leading her to a different body and a different way of being. We did a whole long visualization of a great healing temple and many things.

As she did it, she said, "Wow, yes, I can feel the fire. But when I feel it as something purifying, it comes surrounded by this beautiful green light and this lovely spirit, and all of a sudden I realize that this is exactly what I need for my body." It was the fact that she'd been resisting it—and understandably so, it was terribly painful and terribly frightening—but somehow as she let herself come close to it, like Yeshe Dunden touching that pulse, it transformed in some remarkable way.

And people transform when we let ourselves come close to them. Basically, loving awareness allows us to have a trust in the greater capacity of the heart to hold this human incarnation with all its tainted glory, its beauty and its pain, in a very different way when we listen deeply.

So the foundations of mindfulness—or mindful loving awareness—that I read in that little piece of the ancient text: mindfulness of body, of feelings, of mind, and of dharma. Let me talk about each of them as a reflection for you.

Loving awareness of what is called the body in the body—not some idea, but the direct experience. Now, there are different ways we can approach our human body. One is we can fear for it, worry about it, grasp it, live with a kind of bodily anxiety. Another is we can dissociate from it and just go about our business, not caring about our bodies. If I were to ask, a lot of hands would go up on that side. It's the line from James Joyce that I often use: his character Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body. And you get one or the other, and you're out of touch.

But what happens is you're invited to meditate. And meditation isn't about becoming a good meditator. It's really a training to become present for your own life. As you sit, the invitation is to be with this body and to listen to it and learn from it. And so what you'll notice is that you sit and there are sensations of pleasure and pain. Anybody not have that? And they're not necessarily a mistake.

They're the body showing itself to you. They're part of it.

As you sit with those sensations, you can also begin to notice that if you resist the pain and contract around it, if you look closely, it lasts longer and you suffer more. But if you can receive the physical pain in your body with loving awareness and say, "Yes," just as you would hold a crying child—all right, I have this new grandson who's now three months old, so I've been doing a bunch of diaper changes and things like that. But once the kid is fed and diapered and whatever and they're still crying, what do you do? You hold them. You give that sense of holding, bodily care. And after a while, they kind of settle down.

In some way, that same loving awareness can be brought to this body, to the place that's hurt, to the tension that you carry because you go through the day and there are difficulties. Your jaw tightens and your shoulders get tight and your back, and then you sit. You're very quiet and easeful, and your body hurts. It's not because you're meditating wrong. It's saying, "Hey, remember me? You've tightened me. Now it's time for all this to release itself." It will release when you bring a loving awareness to it. It opens. It heals itself in some deep way.

So the question is, how do you touch this body? Do you touch it with fear or longing or love? There's something kind of beautiful and pure about bringing attention to the body without judgment. Without judgment.

And it's not an easy thing, because the whole culture is selling you how a body should look—the magazine cover ones that are done in the right light with makeup and then airbrushed on top of it, and Photoshop. I mean, that is nuts. And then we think, "Okay, I look in the mirror. I don't look like that. Something is wrong with me. I'm the wrong color. I'm the wrong size. My thighs are too thin or too thick, or my hair, what's left of it, isn't in the right place." The culture teaches us to judge our body rather than to love it.

This is a radical act. When the Buddha said there is a healing that takes place when you bring a loving awareness to the body—to that which is painful and also that which is joyful and beautiful—because the body is an instrument of tremendous joy and ease. When you bring a good spirit into the body, the body can feel it and says, "Okay, you remembered me. You care for me." Even if the world is saying your body isn't cover material or whatever, your body's saying, "Oh yes, she did it." It feels the love.

Here's a different story, just for the fun of it. This is more the spirit of it, but I'm thinking about this also because I have some dear friends who've been in hospitals lately.

"I'm ninety-two years old. I get up every morning at seven a.m. Each day I remind myself: wake up, get up. I talk to my legs. 'Legs, get moving. Legs, you're an antelope.' It's a matter of mind over matter. You have to have the right spirit. I'm out on the street, seven-thirty a.m. sharp. I'm wearing my Honorable Sanitation Commissioner badge they gave me from City Hall. I'm alert, I'm ready, I'm out there. I got my whistle. My job is to help get parked cars off the streets so they can bring in the sanitation trucks and the Wayne broom—the big one, thirty grand for a broom. So when they show up, I go around blowing my whistle to get people to move their cars. I have a great time. People are asleep. They're busy with business. They're busy taking time off from the business. They're busy having a good time. They're busy not having a good time."

Whatever. I don't care. I blow my whistle. I'm all over the place. I don't discriminate either—I go after the sanitation men too. The union got them a coffee break, some coffee. They're having eggs, having bacon, having toast, having French toast. I kid them about it. Then I go right into the restaurant and blow my whistle. They love it. Everybody understands. It's the whistle that gets them. Sometimes I'm having such a laugh I can't even blow it, and then I get back to work. "Schleppers, get moving! We've got to clean the city."

This used to be a beautiful city. People cared. If you didn't pay your rent, the sheriff would come and put your furniture out on the street, but the poorest of the poor would come automatically and drop their pennies and nickels at your house, and put you back into your apartment. That's neighborhood. That's connection.

Now it's different. Things have gotten out of kilter. Hard to say why. People seem to be lost in their thoughts and their own lives. I see them on the streets. Not present. Not that I'm all that different—I'm a schlep myself. I have as many bad habits as anyone. You should see my apartment. Me, Mr. Clean. But I'm trying. Ninety-two and I'm still trying. It's all possible. What can I tell you? I'm not a saint or a wise man. I'm not the two-thousand-year-old man. I'm only ninety-two years old, just a senior citizen. But what do I know that everybody doesn't know? We know. I just go out there in the morning and blow my whistle. That's what I do. You do what you do. Me, I'm having a great time. Wonderful fun. And when people see how much fun I'm having, they have to laugh. What else can they do? And then I hit them with it: "Move your car."

There's something in this story about what it means to love your life. To listen as Yeshe Dunden does, but also to feel that the spirit of your life is part of inhabiting this human body—and to do it with mindful loving awareness.

So close your eyes for a minute. Don't change your posture. Don't get weird about it. Just close your eyes.

It's all right. And it's just a simple reflection as you get quiet. What in your body wants to be listened to? What part of your body? It might be for healing or joy or attention. What does it have to say to you? And sense how you can be present for your body with its pleasures and its joys and its pains and its illness—all of the life of this body—with a free spirit, with attention and care and respect.

Now it turns out that this very same loving awareness of the body is also required for awareness of the body of the earth. Because it turns out your body isn't separate from the body of the earth. Every breath you take dusted Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came over the Pacific, and also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. It's the reality

of it. And the water that you drink—the rainwater that comes—picks up the pollution in China or India or Europe or wherever it is, and carries it. We are completely interwoven.

And you don't want to get a little weirder, but the breath that you're breathing in this room, all those other people breathed before you. It's actually very intimate when you go, "That was what she just did with that breath, and him..." Kind of creepy, right? But the fact is that we are in it together. And the whole notion of separateness dissolves. So it's not just your body, it's the earth's body. And to be able to pay attention to your own physical body in the way that we talked about—that brings healing—it also brings healing to the earth itself.

I just came back from this conference, Wisdom 2.0, on technology and mindfulness, with a few thousand people from Silicon Valley and so forth. And of course, climate change was discussed. Some of the big problems were there on the stage: the problems with technology itself, the problems with climate change, the problem with continuing warfare and continuing racism and injustice and economic injustice. How do we tackle these things?

And the first thing, of course, is to see them clearly. Here are the problems. But then to begin to listen more deeply. Is there a way to hold them with mindfulness, with loving awareness, that allows us to respond differently?

A few months ago, when there was a big climate summit in San Francisco held by the state of California, we had a climate day here at Spirit Rock. A few of you might have come to it. I was up here in dialogue with a really remarkable woman named Cristiana Figueres, who is a diplomat from Costa Rica and has mostly been in Europe. She is, or was, the United Nations Special Representative for Climate Change. So she helped to organize the Rio summit, and then she organized the Paris climate meeting.

But she said that as she'd been doing her work, she was getting more and more depressed—partly because of the science showing how fast things are happening, partly also because of the actors (I guess they call them, like in a bad Shakespearean play) the bad actors, which were a lot of the big countries. And you know who is included in that, right? As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Right, it's the U.S. She shared how recalcitrant people were, how selfish really, in certain ways. So she was really depressed.

She told this story. Someone said to her, "You know what you need to do? You need to go to Plum Village." Plum Village is Thich Nhat Hanh's center, the great Vietnamese Zen master's place in southern France. So she went to Plum Village. She began to practice.

If any of you have ever been with Thich Nhat Hanh and seen him walk, it changes your life. Your body goes, "Whoa, that's what it means to walk mindfully." It's just intense and wonderful. He's so amazingly present. And then he sits down with this calm and very, very deep sense of presence and conversation. He embodies somehow what it means to be present on the earth.

She said she sat and she walked, and that already began to soothe her heart. And then she realized, as she listened to the teachings, she understood the very deep teachings of interdependence—that every breath and every drink of water and the earth that we walk on, that we're all in this together in a very different way than she had understood. And Thich Nhat Hanh, of course, gave to her through those practices a kind of revival of her spirit, helping her realize that there's another way of seeing all of this.

So she said, when I went back to the Paris Climate Accord, everyone was in their corner struggling, and the paradigm was the victims and the perpetrators—which countries were doing it to whom. And she said, "I was able to shift the narrative so that instead of victims and perpetrators, we talked about interdependence. And that shift in my own consciousness and the narrative allowed 148 countries to sign on to the Paris Climate Accord."

So you understand—like Yeshe Dunden feeling that pulse, or her going to Plum Village—that to begin to listen to the pulse of the earth, we respond in a different way.

This from Mary Oliver teaches us how to go to the woods:

Ordinarily, I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable. I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours. Besides, when I'm alone, I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing. If you've ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

This is really that same story of Yeshe Dunden. It's Mary Oliver, our great poet, talking about sitting there and feeling the pulse of life, and then using that love and understanding to make her art, to make her contribution to what allows us to reawaken and reimagine and live this world in a different way.

Oh, so many more things I could say about that, but all right.

The next dimension of mindfulness is mindfulness of feeling. As Don Juan says to Carlos Castaneda, "The most difficult part of the sorcerer's way is to realize that the world is a feeling."

Now that's a really mysterious statement, isn't it? What could he mean by that?

Well, William O. Douglas, Supreme Court Justice, said some years ago that at the Supreme Court where he worked, ninety-plus percent of decisions were based on how they felt about things. And the other ten percent was used to justify their feelings.

Our life revolves around feeling. It directs our love, our longing, our hate, our fear—all of those kinds of things. And the gift of loving awareness is that we can begin to actually know this domain of feelings and not just be caught up in them. Just like you don't have to be afraid of the pain in your body—or some people are so loyal to their suffering, they're afraid of the joy in their body; they don't know how to dance—in the same way, you can learn to tolerate and actually love all the feelings. The sadness and the grief and the longing and the loneliness. The joy and the excitement and the appreciation and the wonder. This whole river of feeling—I have a list of five hundred emotions that starts with affectionate and ambitious and aggressive and anguished and ambivalent and angry and amused and amorous and aversive and antagonistic and antsy and apathetic and apoplectic and anxious and appreciative and argumentative and adamant and addled and amazed and blissful, brokenhearted, bonkers, bored, bad, belligerent, brave.

You know, it's wild, the feelings.

C.S. Lewis says, "Within us is a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds." That's his way of looking at the dark side of it all.

But then we have this headline from the front of the Wall Street Journal: "So Young and So Many Pills"—about the tens of millions of prescriptions for young kids, ADHD medicine, antidepressants, and so forth. It's not that they don't have their value at times, but often it's just some little kid, some little boy or girl whose body is full of energy and who shouldn't be sitting at a desk all day long. You shouldn't either, actually, but that's another story. They just need to go out and run around and hang out with the trees and play. But okay, let's give them some meds and chill them out, make them a little more manageable.

The liberation that comes—neuroscience talks about expanding the window of tolerance—allows us to actually tolerate our humanity, our joys and sorrows, our anger and fear and longing and love. And when we receive them with a bow, we become the space that has a choice. Because without that, we are just thrown around by each feeling.

We're like a boat without a rudder. But when you have established the sense of loving awareness, you can bear witness to the flood of feelings, and you can also choose which to respond to and how.

And when you meditate, they will come. You're just watching your own breath, right? And you feel all the tensions in your body, and your body says, "Remember me." And then the emotions come, and the unfinished business of the heart will come—the grief, the love that you haven't expressed, the creativity bubbling up in you, all those things. And your task is to make a space that knows them with loving awareness, so that like Yeshe Dunden you are listening to the pulse of your own heart and your own psyche.

And this starts to bring a liberation.

First, because you see that we all have it. Anybody here never been depressed? I don't believe you. They didn't even try to raise their hand. You know, we've had them all. Anybody here not been lonely?

When we were in England, Trudy and I were in Parliament doing some teaching, and we got to talk to people. They had just appointed the Minister of Loneliness in England. I'm sure you read about that. And then we have a friend from Harvard Medical School who has something called the Unloneliness Project, to try to reconnect people with the world and one another. But this is it. This is human life. You have it. And you can either get lost in it and frightened, or with the liberation of loving awareness, you can allow yourself to be present for it, and not be afraid to weep and to feel the tears that we all carry. And also not to be afraid to be tender with the world, because it's your world.

The world is your lover in a way that almost nothing else is. It's always here. You can go out and kiss the Earth, really. The astronauts who were lost in space for a while—there were a couple of Russian astronauts at the International Space Station, and their capsule didn't work right, and there was a very good chance that they weren't going to make it back. They went through the fiery descent, and somehow they did manage to get back. They landed in Kazakhstan, and they got out of their space capsule and got down and literally kissed the dirt. They said, from up there, there's nothing more than you want than just to be back on this earth. To see this blue earth and know everything you care about comes out of it, and to return.

So this is the body of the earth, but it's also emotions and feelings. There's a deep healing that comes when you can weep your tears and feel your joy, and stay present for it. And allow yourself to feel the trauma that you carried. And at the same time, know that it's not the end of the story. Because it isn't. You have suffered and you will suffer more. It's part of being a human being, just as you will have joy. That's the game.

And the Sufis say, overcome any bitterness because you are not up to the magnitude of pain that was entrusted to you. Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, you are each part of her heart and therefore each called upon to hold your measure of cosmic pain. You are called upon to meet it with compassion instead of self-pity. Instead of saying, oh poor me—it's like we're in this together, and you can hold this life with the great heart of compassion.

There's something so mysterious about it, all of this.

Let your eyes close again without moving. And let yourself know what it is that is true in your heart and your feelings that wants your loving attention. The unbearable beauty of the world, the ocean of tears. And know that you can hold it all with loving awareness. Like that famous Ojibwe phrase: sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

It's really a conversation with the heart, a deep listening. And it's this capacity that allowed Nelson Mandela to transform the suffering of twenty-seven years in prison and come out with such magnanimity and compassion, changed South Africa and the world. That allowed Wangari Maathai in prison to come out and finish inspiring people to plant fifty million trees in the Greenbelt and Nairobi and around. It's your capacity to hold all of your human feelings and not take them so personally. You're going to have them all. And they don't define you. They actually become the energy of your life.

So body and feelings, liberation with feelings, liberation with the mind, the thoughts. Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you more than your own mind untrained. Not even the worst enemy. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than your own mind trained.

Not even the most loving partner or parents or family.

This is the deal. You have this mind. And the wonderful thing with mindfulness and loving awareness is that with the mind, you can observe the mind. As Muriel Rukeyser, the great poet, said, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." It is the way we see it and tell ourselves that it is that leads our life. And you can begin to see the stories that are told in there. They can be stories of defeat. They can be superhero, fantastic stories.

They can be stories of the great mother or the prodigal son or the noble defeated activist. We have a million stories that we tell about ourselves. All of them are kind of limited in a way, because they're only stories, and you can't be limited to a story.

Remember what Mark Twain said: "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." You see, that's how the fearful mind works, because fear is about something that hasn't happened yet.

I had the pleasure of sitting with Jerry Brown some weeks ago at a party for one of our mutual friends, a really remarkable person. We were sitting at the table with a few folks, and I asked him what he was going to do when he retires. It's in the papers—he's going to go to his grandfather's ranch up in the foothills of the Sierras. He said, "Nobody's going to bother me. They only care about you when you have power. When you're out, they just don't care." He said, "So it's going to be fine."

I asked about legacy, beside all he's done, because he has done a lot of very wonderful things. He said, "Well, I'm concerned about two things. I'm concerned about climate change, and I want to do what I can about that because it's really important. The other thing I'm concerned about is nuclear weapons." This was even before we pulled out of that treaty. He said there are fourteen thousand nuclear warheads around the world, and they're in all these different places. He's on the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists that has that little doomsday clock—two minutes to midnight or whatever. So he's really concerned. He said, "But I don't know what to do. People aren't paying attention to it, and we have to do something."

I thought about it and I reflected. Then I said, "I want to tell you a story."

In ancient India, the gods create the world. Brahma is the creator god, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the destroyer in the Hindu pantheon. Universes get created for an eon or a billion eons, and then they dissolve, and then a new one is created out of nothing. That's how it works. If you haven't noticed, everything is created out of nothing. It really is. And then it disappears into nothing.

What happened to Y2K? What happened to 2018? It disappeared into the void. What happened to this morning's breakfast? Well, that's still in there. But what happened to yesterday or last week or January? It's just gone. It's wild. Stuff appears. Life appears. And then it disappears.

So the gods created the world. And when the world is created, it's both gods and demons. You may have noticed that. There's some balance of good and evil and joy and sorrow and light and dark and birth and death. It's duality to create life. If you have

birth, you have death. Everything with its opposite. And then there are the battles between the gods and the demons. But in this particular universe that had been created, the demons were winning.

And the gods tried everything, but the demons had more power and were winning. Finally, one of the gods said, "All right, all right, we've done all that we can. We have to call Durga."

Durga is the goddess, the mother of Kali, if you've heard of Kali. In Calcutta there's a great temple to her—she's the one who wears the necklace of skulls. Kali is beautiful, you know. And that's just one of her children.

So they called Durga. And out of the Himalayan mountains she appeared, with many arms. In each arm, some weapon, some skillful means. She went right toward the demons. It took her a while to clean house, as she did. But unlike all the others who had tried, she eventually not only defeated the demons, but also removed their fire from the world.

And so I said to Jerry, "Maybe all the men that have been working on these weapons, and all the men who've been trying to stop this, don't have the answer. Maybe it's time to call the mothers. Maybe it's time for the mothers and the grandmothers to come out. Maybe there's some whole other energy of life that can save us in a way that men haven't been able to do."

I tell you this story, and I also have to say I was very pleased, because I'd been thinking, what can a contemplative say to someone in the political world? But it felt like it actually had a kind of wisdom in it. Got lucky, whatever.

But what you can hear in this story is how limited we are by our stories—our personal stories and our collective stories. The collective stories right now include stories about economic justice, climate change, the problems we face, tribalism, continuing conflict, racism. Some of them are really crazy stories, but we've been repeating them for generations and we're locked into them. And we do that within ourselves as well.

The healing comes when we can step back personally and begin to look at what the stories actually are. And then, as the Dalai Lama says, some of these stories do not have my best interest in mind. Some of these thoughts—some of them are really creative ones, and some may be not so creative, those repeated patterns. By becoming loving awareness, you are no longer lost in the thoughts. You actually have a choice.

So close your eyes for a moment. You don't have to move. With loving awareness, let yourself become aware of what are the predominant stories that you tell about yourself and about the world. Do you take them seriously? Do you really believe them? Because they're only partial truths, you know. This is not about fighting, but becoming the healing space of the heart. Feel that healing awareness that can hold it all.

As Thomas Merton writes, "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence beyond thought that is a fountain of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all creation."

As you see the thoughts, also begin to rest in the silence—loving awareness, the vastness that is your true nature, that can know the mind without getting lost in it, without being so identified. Perhaps, again going back to the image of Yeshe Dunden, you can feel what it's like to listen in to your own mind with that same respectful and careful attention. Not judging, but making the space of loving awareness to say, "Oh yes, this is the conditioning, these are the things that have repeated, this is what I've learned, this is what appears, this is healthy, this is not so helpful."

Because your heart knows things that your mind can't know. Your heart knows what's healthy and what's wise for you in ways that you can't think your way out of.

The last of the foundations of mindful loving awareness is mindfulness of the Dharma—a word that means the truth, the way things are, the laws of the universe. This is really at the center of the awakening that's offered through mindfulness. To find a place within reality, within our experience, that can see suffering and joy, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, birth and death arising as they do. Because this is what human incarnation offers you. To become the great heart of compassion and spacious wisdom that says yes.

Remember when you read *Siddhartha* in high school, and it ended with him, after his love affair with Kamala and all those experiences, sitting by the river, seeing all the different voices of joy and sorrow and gain and loss? And being finally at ease as all of the river went by. He allowed it all to pass through him in some way, but he didn't bind himself or get caught in one or another perspective, one or another of those voices. And then, as I believe the translation says, all of a sudden it became a kind of harmony.

And it wasn't the harmony where you don't care, or where you don't go out and mend the places that need mending, or stand up for justice. But you do it in a really different way. You do it because it's your family. It's your earth. It's your children. Not be-

cause you're angry at anybody, but because you know better. Because it's you. And it comes from a place of love. And love is really the only thing that has the power to truly make a difference in this world.

So this is a shift of identity. A bear paced up and down the twenty-foot length of its cage. When, after fifteen years, the cage was removed to give the bear a bigger, open place to live, the bear continued to pace up and down the twenty feet as if the cage were still there. We can live in a kind of conditioned way. Our small sense of self, our thoughts are the way we define ourselves. But it's not who you are.

When you go in the bathroom or bedroom and look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? Face it. You're losing fur here, you're getting extra fur there, you're drooping over there. It's just what bodies do. But the strange thing is that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? And you think, *Wow, look at that. Look at what it's become now. It's wrinkled over there and drooping that way.* Whatever. And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body is born as an infant and a small child and an adolescent and a young adult and older and older, and then it starts to fall apart, and then it dies and goes back to the earth in one form or another. What bodies do.

But in that moment you say, "I don't feel older. Interesting how it's aging now. It's lost that." As our colleague Wes Nisker says, "The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard." That's his description. But anyway, what's true in that moment is you become the witness of it. You realize that it's not who you are. That who you are is the spirit that was born into this body—and that will also leave in that mysterious moment of death. You'll see. You wait and see.

So with deep listening, instead of possessing things, you shift your identity, and you become instead the loving awareness itself. You rest in the consciousness. My teacher, Ajahn Chah, once went to the greatest master of the time to tell him about all his meditation experiences—the lights and visions and samādhi and so forth. And the master looked back and said, "Chah, you missed the point. Those are just experiences. They're like movies—a war movie and a romantic comedy and a documentary and a superhero movie." He said, "They're just movies. The only question is: to whom do they happen? Who is witnessing or seeing all this? Turn your attention back and become the one who knows the knowing. Become the awareness itself." And that is your gateway to freedom.

"How nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. You are fundamentally free. You have a fundamental dignity and nobility that no one can take from you. And this is called the laughter of the wise, which says, "Yeah, it's quite a dance." And we suffer at times, it's true, and we love and we let go and all those things.

But from this place of wisdom, we say, "Oh, this is really a dance of life." And rather than holding on to it, we can see it for what it is and rest in the place of witnessing, of loving awareness.

You are the loving awareness that was born into you.

We can rest in the great heart of compassion. Not because we're supposed to, but because it's our home. There's something in each of us that longs for freedom. And that freedom isn't found in the Himalayas or in some Zen temple or wherever you can imagine it might be. There's only one place where it can be found, and that is within your own heart.

Mary Oliver again, to end:

What can I say that I've not said before? So I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there's an unfinishable story and you are somewhere in it and it will never end until all ends. Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce, but take it also to the forests and the hills. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still.

I am of years lived so far—seventy-four—and the hills and the leaf are singing still.

It's such a gift to be able to quiet ourselves, to learn meditation. Not to become a meditator, but to get real, to become a full human being with that great heart of compassion that was born in you, with your original dignity, and with the invitation of freedom in the midst of it all. That's a true wonder for us.

This is really a reminder to you that there is a way to live. You can think about Thich Nhat Hanh taking a walk, and all of a sudden you realize, "Oh, this is what it's like to walk on this earth and be present." It will serve you. It will serve the people you love. It will serve the things that you care about, and all of us.

So I appreciate your being here. This is now one of your places. Even if you were here for the first night, you can come back anytime and walk the hills, listen to the leaves, and practice with us.

Thank you, and good night.

CHAPTER 85

The Power of Story - Stories that Open the Mind, Mend the Heart and Lead to Joy

Jack Kornfield · 1h05

> *In this richly woven dharma talk, Jack Kornfield draws upon the ancient tradition of storytelling as a vehicle for spiritual awakening and emotional healing. He begins by reflecting on how stories can serve as essential nourishment for the soul—sometimes needed more than food itself—citing his work with veterans and healthcare workers who find healing through sharing their untold narratives in safe, sacred spaces.*
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> *Kornfield shares three profound stories: Terry Dobson's account of witnessing true aikido on a Tokyo train, where an elderly man transforms a violent drunk through loving presence rather than force; Tolstoy's tale of the empress and the wise hermitess, which reveals that the most important time is now, the most important person is whoever is before you, and the most important pursuit is to serve; and the Desert Fathers' story of Abbot Anastasios, whose response to theft demonstrates the transformative power of integrity and non-judgment.*
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> *Through these narratives, Kornfield illuminates core Buddhist teachings on conflict resolution, the bodhisattva path, and living from loving awareness. He references the Dhammapada's teachings on abandoning hatred, explores the meaning of delivering one's unique "cargo" into the world, and invites listeners to discover themselves within each story. The talk weaves together insights from Ram Dass, Thich Nhất Hạnh, the Dalai Lama, and various poets to remind us that we are consciousness itself—timeless, loving awareness born into temporary form—capable of becoming mirrors of stillness in which others may see themselves more clearly.*

Please let yourself sit comfortably and at ease.

The teachings are most importantly meant to be a reminder. There's no quiz at the end. You don't get graded. If you hear something that resonates, that feels true in your own deep experience, then let that be a reminder of something important to you. If something seems wrong, you can question it or just throw it out. But in a way, to listen is its own kind of meditation—of being present and noticing what is evoked, what feels resonant to you and what may not, and what's helpful.

In the past months, I've done a series of talks based on stories. Some of you may have been here. There was a long story about the last year of the Buddha's life and a long story about Sir Gawain and part of King Arthur's court. There was a long Hindu traditional myth about Nachiketa and the Lord of Death, a number of different stories. And I'd like to continue in that spirit tonight and maybe again as we go on.

Barry Lopez, wonderful writer, has a book—he wrote a lot about the North, the Yukon, Alaska, and so forth. The title of the book is *Sometimes You Need a Story More Than Food*. And it really speaks to something so important.

I know in being part of retreats with vets who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan, that the retreats we held were a place—often the first time—they felt safe enough to tell their story. Because a lot of the things that happened when they were there are not the kind of thing you can tell your family or your friends. And so they carry it as a kind of weight on the soul. There's some way in which they'll say, "Well, I can't tell you what I saw." And then it goes on to something even more difficult: "I can't tell you what I had to do." And when you get combat vets and you can make a safe and protected space and say, "Here's the place you can tell the stories that have burdened your heart and hear those of others," it's a remarkable healing.

And in the same way, my beloved wife Trudy, who runs Insight LA, the center in Santa Monica, has had a program for almost fifteen years that started with the healers—the nurses and physicians from the NICU and the PICU, the neonatal and the pediatric intensive care units at children's hospital. And then it grew to other hospitals, and the same thing happened. They would have a retreat and make this beautiful place, and the nurses would come. In the neonatal intensive care, regularly babies die. And you have to tell parents, "I'm sorry, your child died." And that's an occurrence that happens every week. And then you have to clear out the incubator and get ready for the next baby. And you can't go home and talk about that to people. And so again—light the candle and make a sacred space and talk about what it means to hold this life in compassion. And then invite people to tell the stories that they need to for the healing of their own heart.

So that's why sometimes you need a story more than food. You understand. Sometimes to hear it, and sometimes to tell it.

Next month, I want to work with another great story and talk about climate change and drawdown and technology—and some of the kind of stories that we need to rewrite, if you will. So that's going to be important.

For tonight, looking out as we do at the human realm, which is a mixed bag, you may have noticed—you're one of them, so you know, right?—and seeing, along with a million acts of goodness that take place every afternoon, the divisiveness and the continuing racism and conflict and war, made visible in all these different ways. Some of which has always been here, and some in new forms—the kind of modern terrorism that we saw in Sri Lanka this week or that we saw at the synagogue in Southern California. I want to talk some about conflict, in a way, through some stories.

There was an organization that was started in Palo Alto decades ago. Joan Baez, who's a friend, was I think one of the founders of it. And it was called A Better Game Than War. Because we will have conflict. We have different desires and needs and styles. But how do we do this as humanity? How do we deal with conflict with one another?

And I'm part also of supporting an organization called the Nonviolent Peace Force that sends unarmed civilians who are really well-trained into conflict areas—in Sudan, in Syria, in the Philippines, in other places. And mostly what they do is sit down and talk to the people on different sides and then do unarmed accompaniment. And they're able, in doing so, to hear what people are really afraid of and what they really need, and kind of broker some possibilities for civility, even in the midst of difference and conflict.

So let me start with a story.

And I work with him in the men's movement with Robert Bly and Michael Mead and Luis Rodriguez and so forth. He was a great big bear of a man who also became a really wise and remarkable teacher.

So this is his story.

The train clanked and rattled through the suburbs of Tokyo on a drowsy spring afternoon. Our car was comparatively empty—a few housewives with their kids in tow, some old folks going shopping. I gazed absently at the drab houses and dusty hedgerows.

At one station, the door opened and suddenly the afternoon quiet was shattered by a man bellowing violent, incomprehensible curses. The man staggered into our car. He wore laborer's clothing and he was big, drunk, and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby who was in his way. The blow sent her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. It was a miracle the baby was unhurt.

Terrified, the couple jumped up and scrambled toward the end of the car. The laborer aimed a kick at the retreating back of the old woman, but missed as she scuttled to safety. This so enraged the drunk, he grabbed the metal pole in the center of the car and tried to wrench it out of his stanchion. I could see his hands were bleeding.

The passengers were frozen with fear, and I stood up. I was young then, some twenty years ago, and in pretty good shape. I'd been putting in a solid eight hours of Aikido training nearly every day for the past three years. I liked to throw and grapple. I thought I was tough. Trouble was, my martial skill was untested in actual combat. As students of Aikido, we were not allowed to fight. "Aikido," my teacher said, "is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken his connection with the universe and is already defeated." I listened to his words. I tried hard. I even went so far as to cross the street to avoid the pinball punks who lounged around the train stations. My forbearance exalted me. I felt both tough and holy.

In my heart, however, I wanted an absolutely legitimate opportunity whereby I might save the innocent by destroying the guilty.

This is it, I said to myself. People are in danger. If I don't do something, they will get hurt.

Seeing me stand up, the drunk recognized a chance to focus his rage. "Ah," he roared, "a foreigner! You need a lesson in Japanese manners!"

I held on lightly to the commuter strap overhead and gave him a slow look of disgust and dismissal. I planned to take this turkey apart, but he had to make the first move. I wanted him mad, so I pursed my lips and blew him an insolent kiss.

"All right," he hollered, "you're going to get a lesson!"

He gathered himself to rush at me. A split second before he could move, someone shouted, "Hey! Hey!"

It was ear-splitting. I remember the strange, joyous, lilting quality of it—as though you and a friend had been searching diligently for something and he suddenly stumbled upon it.

Who would you be if there was a place for you? Because stories are like storehouses—a good story holds a kind of intelligence within it.

So here's a little secret: I chose this story tonight because it relates to me. What I notice when I read it is that I have more of a feisty quality, more of a Terry quality, than I would care to admit. But I am also at times the person on the train who does nothing.

I'm also at times both the woman with the children and the man who doesn't know how to manage his sorrow and loss. And rarely—very rarely—do I have the presence of mind to act so compassionately.

But you know what I love about this story? Even though it's a story about an old Japanese man who was a master of aikido and an art that takes twenty, thirty years to develop, if you really look at what he did, it's actually pretty simple. There's a guy who's really upset, and this old man just turned to him and said, "What's happened to you? What's going on?" That's a very human thing. We probably all have that capacity.

I'll tell you one thing though: there's a kind of attention, a kind of love that's in that quality of turning to someone. It's not so easy to do, but it's something we can practice. The Buddhist word for this is *mettā*—loving-kindness, a kind of care that we extend toward others. It's part of what it means to be on a spiritual path, part of what it means to be human. That care is a treasure in our humanity. It's also something that we need practice in, because the world doesn't teach us this.

The old man in that story—he wasn't born that way. He practiced.

That touches not just one channel, but our heart and our memory and our emotions and our way of seeing and thinking.

What do you learn from the story? What does it remind you of? Not just in this nice sitting together where people are behaving themselves tonight pretty well—which is a nice part of my job; I generally am with people on their good behavior—but you know how it is with the other people around you, right? And maybe even occasionally yourself, that some other elements of the story might be at play. And how are you approaching that? What is your spirit? That becomes part of the reflection.

I came back a few weeks ago from spending time with Ram Dass. Trudy and I went there to be with him. For those of you who know him—the author of *Be Here Now*—this very wonderful spiritual teacher who is also a fountain of love, really quite extraordinary. He was pretty sick when we were there. He was in the hospital and almost died, actually. We were there with him a lot in the hospital, and then he got better—hallelujah, he's much better. But he almost died, and he said, "Then I changed my mind," and he came back. He's very, very funny and witty.

In his house, he has a great big altar, as big as the whole front row here. There are pictures of his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, and of great saints. There's Mother Teresa, and there's Ramakrishna, and there are statues of Buddha, and Shiva and Ram and all the Hindu deities. But there are also pictures of great Hasidic rabbis, and Mother Mary, and Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, and other people that he admires. It's a wonderful, huge altar.

And always somewhere in the middle—for a while it was Dick Cheney who had a big place on the altar. Now it's our current administration holding that place of honor with a big smile.

He said, "Yeah, this is my practice. This is my practice—to take inspiration and to try to hold the entire world in my heart and love all of it, with all its joys and sorrows."

But it's not just him. It's me and you.

There's an article I read by Dr. Sanjay Gupta, one of the great public figure physicians—he's the CNN doctor on call, basically, who comments on various things. He went from Harvard to CNN. I don't know whether that's up or down, but whatever it is. So this is an article about lessons from meditating with the Dalai Lama, because he went to Dharamsala to be with the Dalai Lama. In his search for what to put on the air in his shows that would be helpful, he thought he would get the Dalai Lama to help him meditate—which happened.

He said he went there early in the morning. They arranged for him to go meditate with the Dalai Lama, and they said, "All right, here's the protocol. You go in, and when you do, you make a bow. He'll be sitting in his meditation, but we've set up a place for you to sit. Go sit quietly, and you can sit with him, and maybe afterward you can talk about it."

Okay—how cool is that? Let's go sit with the Dalai Lama, right?

So he did that, and he said, "I was nervous." They said to call him "Your Holiness," but the Dalai Lama doesn't like that holiness stuff. He's just like, "Come on in." But anyway, there he was in this little modest room in the Dalai Lama's house. He sat down cross-legged, and he said, "All my meditation insecurities began to kick in."

A few minutes passed. He was trying to meditate. After about ten minutes, he heard the Dalai Lama's deep, distinctive voice say, "Hmm, any questions?" He looked up and saw the Dalai Lama's smiling face starting to break into his characteristic head-bobbing laugh.

"This is hard for me," he said—this is Sanjay Gupta speaking.

"Me too," he exclaimed. "After doing daily for sixty years, still hard."

This was at once surprising and reassuring to hear him say. The Dalai Lama, the great Buddhist monk and spiritual leader, also has trouble meditating.

And then he gave Gupta some instructions.

So I read that and thought, okay, I mean, I have my troubles, but what kind of trouble would the Dalai Lama have? The man does know how to meditate. I've sat with him. We've talked about meditation.

And this is not a non sequitur—it threads back to what I was just talking about. You'll hear how he doesn't have the altar like Ram Dass, but he has the Chinese communist military installed in many of the biggest temples in Tibet, where he's not allowed to return. He has a number of his highly respected monks and leaders in prisons who've been tortured. He has concern for the Tibetan people and culture. Plus, as a world figure, people come from all over saying, "Can you help in Sudan? Can you help in Palestine and Israel?"

So when I imagine his difficulty, I don't think it's like, "I'm having trouble finding my breath." I think it's the difficulty of facing that big altar and asking, "What do I do?"

And I'm not saying what your political persuasion is. Each of you has your own politics. Bless you. Whatever I can say, it's tough. But whoever you'd put in the middle of your altar as somebody you had to come to terms with—he has plenty of them. He calls them "my friend, the enemy" sometimes, you know?

So I think that's what he meant. This is a common human predicament we all share. How do we hold the conflicts? How do we even hold that which is causing suffering?

Here's a verse from the Dhammapada of the Buddha. Often I try to change the pronouns to make them more universal, but this one is right in its way:

Look how he abused me and beat me, how he threw me down and robbed me. Continue to live with such thoughts and you live in hate. *Look how he abused me and beat me, how he threw me down and robbed me.* Abandon these thoughts and live in love. In this world, hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

And so here again, it's not the Buddha saying, you know, put a smiley face on it because everything's fine. Really bad and painful and difficult things happen to us and in this world. One needs to try to work to protect people and do what's possible—and protect yourself and all that. But even so, life has pleasure and pain, gain and loss, joy and sorrow.

Anybody not have that? Just checking in here. Okay, you can have your ten dollars or whatever it was back.

But how do you hold this? And how do you hold the conflict that's within you? Because it is in there as well. How do you hold the conflict that's around us in this world? How do you touch it?

There's Terry Dobson, that big bear of a guy, ready to take this man apart, learning a lesson that the world needs to learn, really. Because it's quite clear that we're the nation that sells more weapons than any other nation on earth. Billions of dollars of killing machines, and we don't feel safe. Something maybe not right in this equation.

How do we do this? And how do we embody it in the modern era?

Yes, we have our technology—our techno connections, all the ways we can Snapchat and Instagram and Facebook and email and all the things that connect. But as we know, that's also a very thin connection. It doesn't really have much depth or generally very much emotion to it. And so there is, at the same time, rising loneliness and isolation and lack of meaning.

What gives us meaning becomes part of this question in conflict. And part of what gives us meaning—well, my friend Malidoma Somé, West African medicine man and shaman, says that among the Dagara people, his people, every child is born with a special cargo. I love this metaphor. Cargo is what's carried up the West African rivers on the cargo boats. It's been that way for thousands of years. And the goal of every child and every human being is to deliver the gifts that we're given—to deliver our cargo into the world. If you can't deliver your gifts, what you have to offer, then it will be a painful life for you. So you have to know what your cargo is, and you have to find your way to offer that to the world, and to trust that it's possible.

As the poet and activist Deena Metzger writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again." She speaks about the capacity to take even conflict and difficulty and, in the long run, to see that you can sow seeds that bring people back together again, that create some sense of peace and harmony.

I've talked about this before, but in the Colombian Civil War that went on for fifty years until a couple of years ago when it was more or less resolved, one of the steps taken to resolve that conflict was this: the government got some helicopters and filled them with photographs, then went to the areas of the jungle where the FARC, the revolutionaries, had been living for decades. They dropped photographs of their families—of their old mothers and fathers, of their sisters and brothers grown up, of nieces and nephews they'd never seen. They dropped them into the forest with the names, so that

the people who'd been away as fighters for ten or fifteen or twenty years could remember that they were connected to something bigger, something that had love in it. You understand?

So meaning and connection. And that is, in some way, the theme of the next story.

This is a story I'll mostly tell, although I'll read a little bit of it. It's a story that Thich Nhat Hanh uses. It actually comes from Tolstoy. And where Tolstoy got it—it's an ancient story. But Tolstoy made it sing, as a magician like Tolstoy can do.

One day it occurred to a certain empress that if she only knew the answer to three questions, she would never stray in any matter. What is the best time to do each thing? Who are the most important people to work with? And what is the most important thing to be doing at all times?

So the empress issued a decree through the land saying she wanted answers to these questions, and those who knew the answer should come to her palace. In reply to the first question, of course, all kinds of people flooded in. They sent emails and they texted—some even came in person. One said, for the first question about which was the best time to do things, "Well, you should make a really good Google calendar. You should get everything on your calendar and set aside time for all the things that matter." Another said, "No, you can't really plan because life is too unexpected. You just have to set aside your amusements and be really present for whatever is calling your attention as the empress." Someone else said, "The empress can't do this on her own. She needs a committee, a community of wise people, a council to tell her when to do everything—and follow their advice." Another said, "No, you can't wait for this consultation. You need to consult the magicians and soothsayers, and they'll tell you what's coming, and then you'll know." So there were all these answers.

The responses to the second question also lacked a certain accord, shall we say. One person said to the empress, regarding who are the most important people to work with, that she should place all her trust in the counselors and administrators around her. Others said, "No, no, no, you should work with the physicians and the healers." Still others said, "No, the most important people to work with are your warriors. That's where you're to put your faith—into your military." And the third question drew another set of equally different answers. Some said science was the most important, others said it was based on religion, and others said no, it was conflict resolution skills—or military skills. All kinds of answers.

The empress was not pleased. We are not amused, and we are not pleased. These answers didn't really satisfy her.

So after some time of reflection, she resolved to visit an old wise woman who lived in the mountains, who was well known—a hermitess, I guess you would say—who lived in seclusion at the top of the mountain, as they do in these stories. She was said to be wise, maybe even enlightened. Let's go find the enlightened woman up the mountain to see if she would be able to answer these three pressing questions.

and I'm grateful for what happened, but I've asked these three questions and I'm about to leave and you haven't answered me.

And the wise woman looked up and she said, but your questions have already been answered.

And the empress said, what do you mean?

She said, if you had not dug with me in my garden yesterday, you would have left, and that man would have attacked you on the way down the mountain and maybe killed you. So when is the most important time? Was it yesterday? Helping me dig? Obviously, yes. That time that you dug in my garden was the most important time. And who was the most important person? Obviously I was. And what was the most important thing to do? Obviously to help me, because who knows what would have happened if you hadn't stayed.

And then later, when the wounded man appeared, he was bleeding. Well, the time with him was the most important time because you saved his life. If you hadn't stopped the wound, he would have bled to death. And he was the most important person at that moment, and stopping the bleeding the most important thing you could do. So you have your answers.

There's only one important time, and that is now. The present moment. It's the only time we have any power. And the most important person is always the one who is in front of you, who is in your presence. And the most important thing? It is to serve that person with love.

Those are the answers. And that's the Dharma.

This story that Leo Tolstoy wrote has in it one of the deepest teachings of the Buddha, which is the teaching of presence. The teaching of showing up. Of being here for this life.

When we look outside of ourselves for the things that will make us happy, when we grasp and cling, when we reach for the next moment, the next vacation, the next relationship, the next accomplishment, when we want what we don't have or we push away what is here, we separate ourselves from life. We separate ourselves from the only time we can live, which is the present.

The Buddha said, do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past is no longer. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.

"But you have not answered my questions."

And the wise woman looked back and said, "Don't you see, Your Majesty? Your questions have already been answered."

"How is that?" she asked.

"Well, yesterday, if you had not taken pity on my age and given me a hand with digging these beds, you would have been attacked by this man on the way down and perhaps killed. You would have deeply regretted not staying with me. Therefore, the most important time was the time you were digging in the beds, and the most important person was myself, and the most important pursuit was to be of service and to help.

"Later, when the wounded man ran up here, the most important time was the time you spent cleaning and dressing his wounds, for if you had not cared for him, he would have died and you would have lost the chance to be reconciled with him. Likewise, he was the most important person, and the most important pursuit was to be of service and help in that time.

"Remember," she went on, "there is only one important time, and that is now. The present moment is the only time over which you have any dominion, over which you have any gift of power. And the most important person is always those you are with—for who is right before you? Who knows what will happen in the future and whether you will have dealings with anyone else? But in this moment, those eyes, that body, that voice, that person is there with you. And the most important pursuit, the one that truly tends your heart and makes your life meaningful and worthwhile, is to serve—to bring to that person and to those around you happiness and care. For that alone is what life is for."

And they lived happily ever after, or something like that.

So that is Thich Nhat Hanh and Tolstoy. And it is really a story about the Bodhisattva.

Again, thinking about meaning—and Malidoma's phrase of delivering your cargo—our happiness comes when we have meaning in our life. To not be able to do something that uses your gift is a great loss. And that meaning comes alive in relation to life itself and to one another. Whether you make art or write, whether you tend other people or tend a garden or parent, if you can share your dignity with your generosity, your understanding, your integrity, your vision—if you make that come alive within you and with others—your life becomes blessed. It becomes a source of happiness. This is partly why we practice: to be present enough that we can live in this way, to bring ourselves fully to where we are.

The meaning of bodhisattva—this compound word where bodhi means "awaken" and sattva means "being"—is being committed to the well-being and the awakening of all, to hold all of life in compassion.

So one more story for you. This one comes from the Christian Desert Fathers, nearly two thousand years ago, in the deserts of Egypt and Sinai—mystics and meditators. There was a great abbot of a community, a renowned wise man named Abbot Anastasius. One day a young man came and asked if he could join the order and be with the brothers who were part of that community. He was welcomed in and given a little place to live and a robe and so forth.

The abbot had a most beautiful Bible, inscribed with gold leaf and exquisite calligraphy—very, very valuable. It was used to read in their evening services. The young man, who had grown up poor, saw it and coveted it, thinking it was worth a great deal, which it was. So one night he made off with it. He took it and ran away to the city.

Being in the city with this precious and valuable book, after some days he went into the market and found a merchant who dealt in books and antiquities. "I have a really special book," he said, "and I would like to sell it to you."

The merchant said, "Ah yes, please show it to me."

So the young man brought out this gilded, gorgeous, bejeweled Bible—both the Old and New Testaments. The merchant, who knew about such things, looked at it and said, "Leave it with me for a day or two and I will tell you what it is worth."

The young man said, "I would like to get eighteen thousand for it." Some great number.

"You leave it," the merchant said, "and I will tell you."

Two days later, the young man went back furtively and found the merchant. "I have asked you for a great deal of money," he said, "but I believe it is a beautiful book. Will you not give it to me?"

The merchant said, "Yes, I have discovered it is worth this much."

"How do you know that?" the young man asked.

"Well, I went up in the hills to see my friend Abbot Anastasius, who knows about such things. I showed him this beautiful book, and he said, 'Oh yes, it is very valuable—easily worth eighteen thousand.'"

And the young man said, did he say anything else? And the merchant said, not another word. And the young man began to weep. He said, oh, I've lost something really valuable. I need to return this book.

And he went back and dropped to his knees and wept and begged the holy abbot, saying, you know, I misunderstood what was really a treasure in this place. I took the wrong thing. Can I come back? And the abbot said, here, you can keep it if you like, if it means that much to you. And the young man said, no, no, I can't keep it. My life will never be the same if I keep it. Can I come back?

And so he became a monk and lived in the monastery, and they lived happily ever after—or something like that.

When I read this story, there's something in it that has a kind of beauty to it. And it's really the beauty of integrity and the beauty of generosity. For Abbot Anastasia to not add to the suffering of this young man is a remarkable act, isn't it? When you reflect on the things that happen—we lose things, things are taken from us—it was that verse I read from the Buddha: he robbed me, he beat me, stay with that and you live in misery. But it's not just the end of misery. It's the level of integrity and compassion to ask, what would serve? What's good? Not the things that I have, but this other human being—to see and, in that deep way, to see without judgment, to see with the heart.

It brings a sense, as I listen to this story, of what it means to live from that kind of integrity. And we love it because we already know what it's like. You can feel it in yourself. Suppose you were to have done that, how that feels. Instead of being as we might be—judgmental or possessive, all those things.

I heard a beautiful verse recently from one of the wonderful nuns teaching a retreat here, one of the Western nuns. It comes from the early, 2,600-year-old verses of the Therigata, the enlightened elders among the women of the community. The verse was this, a nun speaking about herself: "My old faults, like snow falling on warm ground."

It's a beautiful, poetic line. There she was, and she could see all the judgments of how she was and how she was supposed to be. My old faults, falling like snow on warm ground—just melting away. Not grasping, not picking up, not living from the place of judgment, but really living from the place of love.

So this third story—you could call it a story of compassion, you could call it a story of integrity. It is your integrity that really transforms the world around you, like it did with the old man in the Terry Dobson story.

There's a passage from William Butler Yeats where he writes: "We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather around us that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life, because of our quiet."

It's an amazing passage. It's not that we're fixing others, but that we become so present with attention, with loving awareness, with love itself, that we become a kind of mirror—a space in which others can see themselves reflected without judgment. And they learn something by our own depth and presence, by our integrity, by our own stillness.

So when we sit and meditate, it's not just—okay, I can release the tension in my body, stress reduction and such, which is a fine thing. We all need that too in these times, or to work out some stuff. But it's really to come back, to quiet the mind and tend the heart and remember what really matters. To be able to live from that place of presence so that when life brings the challenges we all face, we can also be that mirror for others. We can carry that integrity. We can carry that compassion.

And this is the invitation from the Buddha again: Live in joy and peace, even among the troubled. Live in joy and health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy and love, even among those who hate.

This is fierce instruction in a way, but it is an instruction. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled.

Make yourself that embodiment of peace. Live in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy and love, even among those who hate. Become that which you would have the world become. Quiet your mind, tend the heart. Free from fear and attachments, know the sweet joy of living in the way.

Now how to do this? Meditation, yes. Understanding, also yes. From the Buddhist texts, in one conversation the Buddha says, "It seems as though we thought ourselves permanent—we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not." It's tentative, baby. It really is. And it changes, and then you die. But before that, if you're lucky, you get old. We live in a culture that likes to hide all that and have just young people on the covers of magazines, as if you're always going to be like that. Good luck.

How do we navigate? The verse in the teaching says, "This life is like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream." Every day appears for you—like it did for the empress and the old wise woman—and it brings you new things to learn from, to struggle with, to love, to engage in. And then they disappear. They leave a trace, if you will, in consciousness. But it's always changing. And it's always uncertain. What's going to happen tomorrow? We don't know. Isn't that true?

So then how do we live in this wild uncertainty? Star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud. If we're really attached—me and mine and my things, my point of view—there is, as Terry Dobson taught, a vastness that you are a part of that is so beyond the small sense of self. And you know it. You know it at times when you make love—if you're lucky enough to, it's a wonderful thing. It is. It's pretty cool. You know it looking out at the night stars on a long, dark night in the desert. You know it listening to an amazing piece of music, or at the time of the birth of a child, or sitting holding the hand of someone when they die. The gates between the worlds open, and you go, "Wow, what is this life? Is this going to happen to me?" Yes, it is. Then what is it? What is it for? What is this mystery?

And then somehow in this vastness, some sense opens that you're not just this body. You're not. Your body has changed. You were that little tiny baby body, and a kid body. That's not you. It just isn't. Think you're made out of kale and burgers? It's just not your identity. You rent it. You get to use the body. But you were that spirit that was born into this body that will also leave it. You'll see when it happens at the end.

It's a wild thing that happens. You get to inhabit this body for a while. But what does it mean to rest in vastness? To remember that who you are is actually consciousness itself—the spirit that came into this body, your loving awareness. That's what you are. And all this stuff happens in loving awareness.

In your meditation, you can begin to trust that the heart of loving awareness, which is compassion and understanding, is big enough to hold the whole dance: the joys and the sorrows, the gain and the loss, the pleasure and the pain, the beauty of it, and the ocean of tears. You are larger than you think. Way bigger. Larger than you imagined.

And then you become the old man in the subway car. You become the wise woman on the mountain. You become the abbot who's unafraid to lose things because in the end, you know how it goes. It's like that very rich man who died, and they were talking in the neighborhood: "Well, how much did he leave?" And somebody else said, "Why, everything, of course." That's how it works. That's the game, isn't it?

But when you understand this, there comes a kind of freedom. The freedom comes when you sit in meditation and you can allow the whole range of emotions—the tears and the longing, the love and the tenderness and the fear—and say, "Yes, all this can be held in the heart of compassion." And then you rise up. As it says in Zen, there are only two things: you sit and tend the garden, and you go and tend the garden of the world. But you do it from a different place, from a place that's freer and less attached and less about me—because me is just temporary—and more resting in that timeless awareness that is who you really are.

A poem before we end, from Alison Luterman. She's an Oakland poet and a friend of mine. It's called "At the Corner Store":

It was a new old Arab man behind the counter, skinny, brown, and eager. He greeted me like I was his prodigal daughter, as if we both came from the same world, somewhere warmer and more gracious than this foggy city. I was thirsty and alone, sick at heart, grief soiled.

Exiled from family through my own faulty temperament.

Now there's a poetic line—"exiled from family through my own faulty temperament." A little self-reflection there.

And his face lit up like I was his lost sheep wandering home, coming back to the freezer bins in front of the register, which were always filled with the same Starhart ice cream sandwiches and the dusty shelves with corn chips, and of course the immortal Jim Beam.

I shuffled to the register and bought my bottled water, and he returned my change beaming like I was a bright new bud on the just-bursting-open cherry trees, like I was everything precious struggling to grow, and he was blessing me as he handed my change over the counter with its plastic tub of red licorice whips, five for a quarter.

This old man, who didn't speak English, beamed out love to me the iron week after my mother's death, so that when I emerged from his store, my whole cockeyed life—wonderful failure—glowed like sunset after rain.

I heard the city dogs yelping with passion in their yards, and in the driveway across the street, a woman and a girl danced to contagious reggae.

Praise Allah, the Buddha, Kuan Yin, Jesus, Mary, and old Jehovah, for the eyes and the hands of the blessed one are everywhere.

These stories really talk about who you are in the deepest sense—and what's possible for you, what's possible for us as human beings. For you are larger than you think, and more noble. And this understanding satisfies you in a way that almost nothing else can.

It's wonderful to watch the light at the end of the day usher in the night. The night is considered a bride in some traditions, coming in. You can reflect a little on these stories and where you find yourself, what they remind you of that's true.

Alan Watts wrote that the art of living is neither careless drifting on one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, regarding it as utterly new and unique, and having the heart and mind open and truly receptive to this life that we're given.

So let's sit for a little bit.

You are consciousness itself. Timeless, loving awareness born into this body. You contain the great heart of compassion, the eyes of wisdom. These are your birthright. Let yourself sit quietly. Let the mind quiet.

Let the heart soften. And remember these gifts. They are your birthright.

I thank you for your kind attention. It's a sweet thing to sit as the day turns to night, as we did in the spring with all the amazing green hillsides—still mostly there. It's also sweet to simply stop in a busy culture and listen to ourselves.

Drive politely out there; there are lots of people. If you can, become a member of our stewardship circle—that would be a beautiful thing, and we deeply thank you. It makes a lot of difference. It's a beautiful thing to support the things you care about, whatever they are.

Good night. Thank you.

CHAPTER 86

The Dharma of Climate Change

Jack Kornfield · 1h18

> *In this deeply moving talk, Jack Kornfield addresses one of the most pressing challenges of our time through the lens of Buddhist practice. Drawing on the Four Noble Truths, he examines climate change as a form of collective suffering rooted in greed, hatred, and the fundamental delusion of separateness. Kornfield shares how UN diplomat Christina Figueres transformed her approach to the Paris Climate Accord after learning meditation from Thich Nhat Hanh, shifting from victim-perpetrator dynamics to recognizing our interconnected global family.*
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> *Through two powerful stories—a Taoist tale of a man who spent a century replanting desolate Chinese forests one seed at a time, and a Jātaka story of a brave parrot whose compassionate efforts to save forest creatures moved the gods to tears—Kornfield illustrates that meaningful change happens through persistent, loving action rather than grand gestures. He references Paul Hawken's 'Drawdown' research showing that solutions to reverse climate change already exist, with the education and empowerment of women ranking as the single most effective intervention.*
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> *Kornfield emphasizes Gary Snyder's teaching that we must save the earth not out of guilt, fear, or anger—the very forces causing the destruction—but out of love. The talk offers practical wisdom for holding ecological grief while remaining empowered to act, reminding us that our meditation practice naturally extends outward: 'You sit, and you sweep the garden, and it doesn't matter how big the garden is.'*

So maybe take a breath or two and let things quiet down, if you will. I hope you got some cookies or met a friend or took a little walk. I'm glad we're back together.

This evening I want to do some teachings on climate change. And you know how it is as a teacher, or as a human being—we teach what we need to learn, really. So I'm talking to you, but I'm also trying to understand in myself how to hold this. And it's not that easy.

I have a new grandson. His name is Desmond, and last week he turned six months old. He rolled over three times on his six-month birthday. In India, it's a very special thing. They call it rolling over day when the baby first rolls over. It's a holiday. Baby

Krishna, in the mythology—that was the day he first rolled over and then opened his mouth, and his mother peered in and there were all the galaxies and stars, and she said, "Oh, this isn't a regular baby I had." So rolling over is a big deal.

I'm going to try something different tonight, and hopefully it will be helpful to me anyway, and maybe to you. Over the course of the last number of months, I've been telling some big stories and using the stories as a way to open the mind and the heart to some greater understanding for all of us. One was the story of Sir Gawain from the Arthurian legends, and the theme of it was what women want. You'll have to listen to that to see if you can find the answer. One was about the Bodhisattva Vimalakirti. One was a great story from Tolstoy that's used by Thich Nhat Hanh about an empress. Stories are really powerful. Barry Lopez is a wonderful writer about the Arctic and the North especially. One of his books is entitled *Sometimes a Person Needs a Story More Than Food*. There's something about stories that nurture the heart.

So let me begin and have some stories to weave in with this. And it's really a reflection. It's not like there's a quiz or an exam at the end. If anything, it's just a reminder, a meditation for you to sense what you know, what is true for you in this that has some value.

When my teacher Ajahn Chah, who was a forest meditation monk and master from Thailand, came to visit—his first visit to the U.S.—we picked him up at the airport in Boston. He'd never been here. Then we put him into a big van with a couple of the other monks that came with him to drive him out to our center in central Massachusetts, buried in the hills of Massachusetts. We drove down Memorial Drive and showed him MIT and the towers of Harvard and so forth, showing him the Boston University sites and things like that. Then we got on the Massachusetts Turnpike and drove for twenty minutes or so until we got outside the belt of the city. Then we started to pass not just fields, but woods. And of course, New England has a lot of forests and woods in it.

We're driving along and his eyes got bigger and bigger. He said, "What are these woods? What are these forests?" We drove a little. He said, "Pull over, pull over." So we pulled over on the turnpike. He got out and walked up to the fence at the edge of the turnpike. There were all the pine trees and some of the maples and oaks and all the trees that one has in New England. His eyes were wide and he said, "Wow, who lives in this forest?" He was smelling it. He's a forest monk, you know. "What does it smell like in this forest? What kind of animals? Do you have bears? Are there lions or mountain lions? Who lives in here?"

Then he turned to me and said, "How far do these forests go?" I said, "Oh, maybe a thousand miles north up toward the Arctic, fifteen hundred miles. They go a really long way." He got very excited. Forget Harvard and MIT. Let's go for the real deal.

Because if you look at the Buddhist tradition archetypally, the Buddha was born under a tree. He practiced his meditation under a tree. He got enlightened under the Bodhi tree. He taught under the trees for years and lived among them. And then he died under those two beautiful sal trees which burst into flowers, as the story goes—you know how those stories are—as he was dying. There's this very deep connection with our inner opening, with our own well-being, and the well-being in connection to the natural world around us.

I remember going to visit another great forest master, an Ajahn named Buddhadasa, after I'd been teaching for a few years, and saying to him, "Ajahn Buddhadasa, students in America have a lot of trouble with self-compassion. Not to speak of kindness for the people around them, but especially for themselves. There's so much self-judgment and criticism, shame, trauma—all these things. Do you have any advice for us?"

And he said, "Yes, it's simple. Take them out into the woods and the forests and the great trees and the rivers. Bring them into the natural world and teach them the meditations of loving-kindness." He said, "After they've been out there for a while, they'll get better." It was that simple for him.

When we lived in the forest monastery, as I did as a monk, it was beautiful because we got to watch and live in the seasons, see the phases of the moon, feel the heat of the hot season and the rains of the monsoon—all the while sweeping the paths with great care, surrounded by the critters of the forest, the wild birds, occasional wild cats, and cobras at a couple of the monasteries. At night where it was dark, we'd have these little walking sticks, and you'd tap the path to let the snakes know you were coming. Everybody has to use the path, but you want to have a little traffic pattern there so you don't step on somebody.

This is the world. And I didn't know that much—my upbringing was quite suburban. The outdoors to me was like the camping store at the mall, basically. Pretty pitiful. So this was very moving and wonderful, to live in this way.

What was clear is that the training of mindfulness was not just mindfulness of our breath or our emotions or the different thoughts that we have, learning to hold them in compassion and find a place of equanimity or peace in the middle of all that. The word mindfulness—*sati* and *sampajanya*—is a compound word with two parts: mindful presence and mindful response. It's not just passive, eyes closed, navel gazing. That's a very

limited understanding. You quiet yourself, you tend the heart, you bring in the quality of compassionate presence—that's one part of it, mindful presence. And then from that you respond to the world. They say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is—the garden of the world.

The monks and nuns where we lived in these forest monasteries, in the wilder parts of the borders of Laos and Thailand and Cambodia—still pretty wild in those forests—they could see from very early on the destruction of the forests, because it's been happening for decades now. When my teachers were traveling in the forests and jungles, there really were quite a few tigers. And the word for Laos, one of the descriptions of the country, was the land of Lang Xang—the land of a million elephants. The forests were filled with wild elephants, and with gaur. You know those little cans of Red Bull? A red bull is actually a wild bull in the forest. They had them—not so many left, but they had them all.

What the monks and nuns saw is that as modernization came, the forests were being cut down and the natural world was being decimated. One of the responses, which is quite famous, is that some of the abbots and famous monastics would go out into the remaining stands of forest and take their own robes, remove them, and wrap them around the biggest trees—the great old teak trees and the antique trees—ordaining them as abbots of the forest with all the chanting. Because there was such reverence and belief in the sacredness of the robes and of the monastics, that part of the forest would remain untouched. They understood, they could see this in some way.

That was thirty, forty years ago. I was there starting a long time ago—let us say almost fifty years ago. What a trip it's been.

So now we hear about and see the effects of climate change. It's becoming much more of a compelling and important question for us. And the question is: How do we live with this? How do we practice with it? How do we respond to it?

You know, out of fear, heartbreak, despair, denial, anger. What do you do with climate change?

One map that may be helpful—one model from the inner world of practice—is the Four Noble Truths of the Buddhist teachings.

The first of these Noble Truths is the Noble Truth of Suffering. It doesn't say life *is* suffering. It says life *has* suffering. Anybody not have that? Raise your hand. You can have your fifteen dollars back. It doesn't matter how successful you are—you're going to have it. You're going to have loss and aging and conflict and difficulty. And if you get more successful, you'll also have more problems. Try it out. You'll see.

But the First Noble Truth, which says that this is how it is, might also be the First Noble Truth of climate change itself. The level of CO2 in the atmosphere is now higher than it's been in three million years. Every year we're burning enormous amounts of carbon, and we're only beginning to feel the impact of that change in the atmosphere. The blanket of CO2 is being joined by enormous releases of methane gas, especially in the Arctic and in the tundra. They talk about huge methane burps or belches coming out as the permafrost starts to melt, or from some of the lakes in the Arctic. Methane is eighty-six times more volatile in its environmental impact than carbon dioxide—huge amounts.

In both the Arctic and the Antarctic, there is two-thirds less ice than there was in the 1970s. Glaciers are disappearing, and billions of tons of methane are starting to be released. The polar ice caps are part of what keeps the world cool—not just like a refrigerator with ice, but because they're white, they reflect sunlight back into space. As they start to disappear, and the sea ice sometimes now is ninety-five percent less than it had been, everybody's waiting eagerly—the shipping industry, the military—to have no ice in the Arctic. Now we can do all this exploration and send our ships. But what does that mean for us as a planet?

Every day, the extra heat that this carbon dioxide envelope creates, absorbed by the earth, is the equivalent of 400,000 Hiroshima nuclear bombs—enormous amounts of heat being absorbed. And then there is the sixth great extinction, as you know, with a thousand plant and animal species going extinct every week from the biosphere that we're a part of. Each degree Celsius of climate change also reduces the agricultural output of grains by six percent. The deserts get more arid. Wild storms and floods happen. Ocean currents shift. And our children and our grandchildren are the inheritors of this.

My good friend and colleague Wes Nisker says he's buying beachfront property in Arizona right now to deal with this rising sea level. You've got to laugh at something.

So this is the First Noble Truth of climate change. It's the way it is right now for us as human beings, and worthy—as the Buddhas that you are—of seeing clearly.

Then the Second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering. And the causes are really straightforward. Greed, hatred, and delusion or ignorance are the main roots of suffering. You may have noticed them in the modern world. Greed—the rapacious way that we treat the natural world. Hatred—the arising of conflict and war, racism. All of that falls under hatred, and it falls under delusion as well. The big delusion is the delusion of separateness, where you actually think you're separate from this. When the truth is

that every breath you take dusted the tops of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came across the Pacific. And it also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. That's what you breathe. Because we're in it together.

So this is the Second Noble Truth: that there are causes, and the causes are rooted—yes, in the behavior of corporations or governments or groups of people—but really they're rooted in the human heart. In greed, in hatred, and in the deepest delusion, which is the delusion that we're separate, that we can get ours and it's not going to affect anybody else. A kind of denial of this.

And then there's a path. Fortunately, suffering isn't the end of the story. It's the beginning of the story, along with its causes. The third noble truth tells us there is an end to suffering. And the fourth noble truth reveals a path to that end. This ending means waking up from the trance of separation, from this false sense that we're separate from the rest of life. It means releasing the small sense of self that is sometimes called the body of fear, where we really believe that somehow we're not part of life itself, which we came out of.

And the path? It begins with clear seeing—what's called wise understanding, wise intention. Then it moves into integrity: seeing the truth, telling the truth, acting with integrity. Based on that foundation come wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise focus. All these qualities that we learn inwardly—how to be loving and present for this human life, how to be present for another being with care and respect and love, that kind of dignity that each human being deserves—this is the same quality we must bring to the environment and the earth around us.

Now, this asks for our response.

Some months ago, we had a climate day here when Jerry Brown was part of the host of the San Francisco Climate Action. People from all around the world came. One of the people who came to Spirit Rock was a woman named Christina Figueres. I was sitting up here in dialogue with her. She was very cool—a diplomat from Costa Rica, I believe, who was later transferred to Europe and became the UN representative for climate change. She helped organize the Rio climate conference and was the key figure in the Paris Climate Accord.

As we were having our dialogue, she told me that her work in climate—tending to the climate—had left her with a kind of disabling depression and despair. She didn't know what to do. This was leading up to the Paris meetings. Someone said to her, "You need to go and see Thich Nhat Hanh," the Zen Master who has his place in Southern France at Plum Village.

So she went there, she said, feeling a lot of despair. They taught her to meditate. They taught her the practices of the great heart of compassion, to feel that you're part of everything. They taught her the practices of empowerment. And she said, "It turned my life around. It changed me to realize that I could work with my internal climate and bring a quality of love and compassion to what had otherwise been too much anguish. I returned to Paris in a different place."

She said that what she learned there—Thich Nhat Hanh's beautiful teachings of interdependence, of how we are connected—transformed her perception when she arrived in Paris. "I saw that everybody there was acting from the place of victim and perpetrator," she told me. "You're doing it to us," or "You're blaming us for doing it to you." She said, "We weren't going to get anywhere with victim and perpetrator. So I began to teach them what I'd learned: that it's not victim and perpetrator, but that we're part of a big family and we're all in it together."

She said the language that she brought from the Dharma teachings, from Thich Nhat Hanh, her new understanding—it changed the climate of the climate groups. And they were able to get those 186 nations to sign on.

When people exclaim "Oh my God" upon seeing flowers, it means those blossoms have made them present. The beauty connects with their soul, and that is transformational.

"Oh my God. What did he say? We're going to pollinate the earth with love?"

This teaching comes from Thich Nhat Hanh. He said the mind and heart is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds—seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love, but also seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate, and forgetfulness. These healthy and unhealthy seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of the heart and mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water. If you water a seed of peace in your heart, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness are watered, you will become happy. If the seeds of anger are watered, you will become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.

This is his invitation.

Now, a story for you—a Taoist story. I'll read a bit of it and then tell the rest.

This story was told to me by Li Peng, who's now an old man with a thin gray beard who sweeps the path to the Taoist temple outside the prosperous village of Fengshui. The village was not always so prosperous. Indeed, it stood on barren land with only a

few of the most rudimentary huts for the four families who eked out a living grazing a few scrawny animals and planting seeds in the dry, bony soil with a prayer for their growth.

This desolation is not new to China—oh, it's a sad story and an old one. You who have a chance to know what is befalling the last forests of our modern times should consider it well, for China was not always bereft of forests. Forests hold the soul of the land, and the greenness of their trees breathes life back into the air that we breathe together. Those among us fortunate enough to have entered a great and beautiful forest even once in our life cannot forget such a memory—the spring in our feet, the vibrancy of our breath, the joy of the cells of our body.

But now most of the forests of China are dead. They've been dead for five hundred or a thousand years. There are so many of us. We've cut them down to build homes, for cooking, for warmth, to clear the land for yet one more field. And the land has become barren, and the rivers yellow with the soil that's run off. Even young children know something is wrong, never seeing a great forest or hearing the cry of birds in its treetops, stopping for the noise of unseen animals. They know something is missing. They hear the stories of wolves and bear that lived in the forest, of wild pig and mountain tiger. And their hearts too must long for a time when the forests were alive, when human life was more fully alive.

But all is not lost.

Li Peng, who is telling this story, talks about how it is to live in this village, Fengshui Li, and how it's become a beautiful place filled with bamboo forests, streams with clear water, glades, sweet and porous.

He says at the end of the previous century, there was a Taoist elder, a dragon named Tam Yang Boon. Dragon is the name for a great master in the Taoist temples. Li Peng was born himself nearby. Tam Yang Boon was born by the Lochi river bank, and as a young man, almost more than a hundred years ago, he was a dutiful student who took the Confucian examinations, passed them, and became a well-known figure there. He married a lovely young woman and they had the beautiful village ceremony that they'd celebrated for a thousand years. The pigs were offered, people danced. And here was Tam Yang Boon, now a successful member of the community, graced with a child named Most Precious Gift.

And then the sorrows came. His child got pneumonia and died. His father also died in an influenza epidemic, and his wife began to grieve so much that after time she too lost her life. His mother went into a Taoist nunnery, and he didn't know what to do. He couldn't return to his village.

He lived there and learned the secrets. Tam Young Boon taught him how to care for the forest, how to soften the shen tree pods for planting, how to create a small orchard for hundreds of new saplings. And wherever the forest was replanted, new hillsides were covered with trees, the streams filled with moisture, and the young forest began to fill with wildlife that could sense, "Ah yes, here is a beautiful place to live."

Now Li Peng, living there with Tam Young Boon in the forest as it was growing—it had covered ten thousand rai—he began to realize that his own life as a scholar, his own life as a teacher, didn't mean anything when the land was desolate as it was. And so he asked if he might stay with Tam Young Boon for longer. He trained with him and learned how to tend the forest.

But then he got news that there was difficulty in his own family, and he had to go away for some years to tend his aged parents, to do what he could back where he was born. But in his heart, he longed to return to the mountains.

After some years, he walked from that temple back up into the hills, and now the forests were great and wild and more vast than ever. He knew he was on the right trail when he heard the sound—*ching, ching*—amazed at how beautiful the Chinese maple had grown, at the tracks of wild animals everywhere.

And remarkably, Tam Yang Boon was planting the very day he came back, now decades after he had first met him. Tam Yang Boon said, "Come stay with me and eat the herbs of the forest and learn how to live in the cycles of the Tao." And so he learned from the teachers—the wind, the rocks, the trees. He learned the harmony of life.

But then Li Peng fell ill and couldn't remain in the mountains. Even the Tao has its seasons and difficulties. He returned to the monastery. And now again, ten thousand rai had been planted and reclaimed. In the villages, goats and pigs squealed under the houses, and the dikes between the rice paddies had clear flowing water. The children were already accustomed to a diet of good food and white rice from the paddy.

"I tell you this story," says Li Peng, "with some sadness, because after Mao's great triumph, there are only a handful of the five million monks and nuns of the Taoist and Buddhist temples that were there. Li Peng remained in the temple, and somehow I, as a

young boy, was called there too. My heart went to join him and learn the ways of the Tao. So I lived with him as an old man for the last eight years and heard the stories of Tam Yang Boon and practiced the Eight Treasures.

"Several times I climbed to the forest to look for the immortal dragon Tam Yang Boon, but there was no sign of him. I thought perhaps he had died. But then one day in the far distance, I heard that sound—*ching ching*—of the immortal mountain way, the dragon. And now I've decided to go into the mountains myself, for it is also my way. I write you this story so you remember as I leave.

"Li Peng taught me the secret of soaking the shen tree pods and showed me the fire herbs that warm the body in winter. Sometimes I feel there's not much honor left for the Tao in our temples, and I'm called to these mountains, to the animals that roam there, to the sweetness of the forest valleys.

"I know there's desolation where you live also. I know that your forests have been lost and that many of your friends do not know who they are. But the earth will not always be desolate, and the Tao has its cycle of return. Perhaps one of you who reads this story will know the spirit of the immortals in your heart and go off to the mountains and replant the forests of the earth."

That story is based on a tale called *The Man Who Planted Trees*, written by Jean Giono. This is a different version that I wrote in a Chinese style, and I called Jean Giono's wife to ask if that would be acceptable. She said yes, it would be fine to tell this story.

What was important for me in sharing it with you, just as I read Thich Nhat Hanh's passage about seeds, is to remind you that wherever we are in this dilemma of climate change, it is not the end of the story. The seeds that you plant and the possibilities of these seeds are what will renew the earth.

As Henry David Thoreau has said, "Though I do not believe a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

So what does this mean for us? How do we respond to this enormous threat to humanity and to the animals and creatures of the earth?

I have this page my daughter gave me, in her third-grade handwriting. I treasure it. She said, "Daddy, I think you could use this in your talks." It's a quote from Chief Seattle: "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men and women would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man."

You hear it, and it's the same principle as this story. How do we respond to this great threat?

Notice in yourself. Here you come to meditate, and you have your own spiritual inclinations. Notice with mindfulness: what is this touching in you? For many of us, it will evoke fight, flight, or freeze. Let's speak in terms of trauma, because this is a collective trauma of humanity and the earth. Flight—"I'm going to move to New Zealand. I'm going to Idaho. I'm going to get out of here somewhere."

You know how that one goes. Far away, as if it's really going to help. That's flight.

Fight. Fight against it. Fight against those people.

Or freeze—denial, hopelessness, distraction. "There's nothing I can do." As if there really was nothing you could do. Or just the desolation.

What was talked about in that Chinese story is the desolation of a materialistic society, where we could almost describe much of our society by the absence of the sacred. What it means to have a sacred relationship with one another, with this beautiful earth that we live on. In a way, that's why we have Spirit Rock—to remind us of this, to have such places as this.

But the real question is: what is possible for us? Here's Tom Young Boon, going through a hundred years planting seeds, and forests are coming back and new villages are growing.

Gary Snyder, one of our greatest environmentalists, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, the visionary of bioregionalism for fifty years, was asked by our colleague and friend Wes Nisker: "Gary, you see the oceans rising, species disappearing, climate getting hotter and hotter, all the refugees pouring out. What advice do you have for us?"

And Gary looked back as the great Zen teacher that he is, as well as an environmentalist, and he said: "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt. Don't save it out of anger. Don't save it out of fear. Because those are the very forces that are causing the difficulty. If you're going to save it, not as an act of war—save it as an

act of love. Save it because you love it. Because that's the only power that has the force to match what we're seeing as difficulty. It's the force that lets mothers lift cars off their children. It's the force of love."

And then it's not a sacrifice. It's not a sacrifice if your foot is injured or your hand is injured in some way. You don't think, "Oh, that poor foot, I wonder if I should help it. Oh, that poor hand, I wonder if I should take it out of the fire." You know it's part of you.

Once, wrote this Tibetan lama, "I was staying with friends in Colorado, and I was a great horseman. I took my favorite horse, Rocky, on a trail ride through the back country high mountains. I'd ridden Rocky before, mostly in the arena. He was very intelligent, but he didn't know how to walk a high mountain trail. This was a new situation. I was leading the group, and that also made him a bit nervous.

"I coaxed him over certain rocks, shifted my weight to indicate to him to go around certain others, but he kept stumbling. We came to a narrow place in the trail. On one side was a steep shale cliff up, and on the other a long drop—a thousand feet into a river. Rocky stopped and waited for my direction. We both knew that one wrong move would plummet us into the river below.

"I guided him toward the gorge. Subtly shifting my weight toward the high wall of shale, I thought that if he slipped, I could jump off and save myself. The moment I shifted, Rocky stopped cold and craned his head around to look at me. He knew exactly what I was doing. I could tell that he was shocked and hurt that I was planning to abandon him. The look in his eye said, 'You and me together, right?'

"I took a breath, shifted myself back into the center of the saddle, and we began to walk together."

This is the movement that's needed. It's not to separate ourselves from the world, but to quiet the mind and connect with heart—our own heart—and rise to meet with the greatness of heart the dilemma that we carry. The problem isn't refugees at the border or immigration.

Much of the crisis at the border stems from climate change and its effects on Central American crops and farmers. People are fleeing the devastation. Climate drives poverty, drives conflict, drives death and loss—and people are running for their lives. This is not a small thing. And we have to let ourselves feel it.

Gustavo Barajaño Lopez, a teacher, writes: "Each day I open my class with a morning circle. Nineteen seven and eight year olds sit on a colorful rug, talk about their favorite color, their ideal superpowers, how they feel, or who they'll be when they grow up. At recess, I read about a seven-year-old who died in Border Patrol custody after navigating the New Mexico desert. Her name is Jakelin Caal Maquin.

I begin to wonder—did she make walking through the desert a game? Count the number of cacti? Make messages with stones in the sand? I wonder if she went to school. Did she have to leave midway through the year to work picking strawberries, like my father? Would she color a picture in desert sunrises?

I wonder if she knew where she was going. What was America to her? I wonder if she spoke K'iche' or English or Spanish or Mam. What would she write about?

My students are learning math multiplications. I wonder if she knew her times tables. What is 15,000 children times two parents in different detention facilities? What is a number of bottles of water times border patrol boots? Did she know the definition of terror, or did she call it fear?

This not knowing brings tears. I wonder who she was. I see her now. I wonder who she would have become."

The thing about all of this is that it's really one person at a time. As William Blake said, "If one is to do good, it must be done in the minute particulars. General good is the plea of the hypocrite, the flatterer, and the scoundrel." You actually have to see the people, the animals, the beings involved who are part of your family.

So there's another story. We're still wending our way through this problem that we all carry, and I know you hold it as I do.

Once—even longer before Tam Yong Boon was born—a long time ago, before the Buddha was the Buddha, when he was still practicing to become enlightened, there are these volumes called the Jataka Tales that recount his past lives. In one of them, years ago, the Buddha was born as a friendly little parrot in the forest. He lived happily and delightedly there. He loved flying through the branches. He made friends with so many other creatures. And his spirit was one—since he was the Buddha to be—of joy and happiness in life, of care for others, of the gift of flight.

One day, the skies over the forest turned dark, and there was a huge storm, a lightning storm. As the storm ended, flashing and roaring, the wind began to howl. In the days that followed, the atmosphere grew turbulent, and lightning struck and crackled across the sky. A seed of fire was born in the heart of one of those trees that lightning had struck. As the forest dried out, that blaze began to spark a huge conflagration.

We know about this, don't we, here in California?

Terrified, as the smoke began to rise, the animals ran wildly in every direction, seeking safety from the burning flames and acrid smoke. When the little parrot smelled the smoke, he flung himself bravely into the fury of the fire, crying out, "Fire! Fire! You must run! You must run!" Many of the animals fled to the safety of the river, but many others were trapped by flame and smoke.

Rather than flying to safety himself, the parrot continued circling over the raging fire, seeking some means to help all those he knew on the forest floor. A desperate idea came to him. Darting down to the river, he soaked his small bird body in the water, then flew back into the inferno. Unaware of the flames, he dropped down low to find anyone he knew from that forest—a squirrel or a badger—and would shake the drops of water from his feathers to give them some moments of cooling, like little jewels of something precious falling through the fire.

Again and again, he would return to the river, soak himself, and look for any creature in danger, dropping as many droplets of water as he could upon them. His lungs ached.

He was dizzy from the flames. But he thought, what else can I do but fly? I must do this to help.

Remember, this is the Buddha as the parrot. You've got to get the story here.

Now, it happens that up in heaven, some of the gods and goddesses who dwelt in their gorgeous deva-like palaces looked down and saw the forest fire. They saw that something interesting was happening, because their seats become very hot when something really cool is happening down on earth. Okay, something's happening—what is this? And they looked down and they said, "Look at that little parrot! How completely foolish, trying to put out a raging forest fire with his own little wings. Whoever heard of such a thing? Why, it's absurd."

But one of the gods looked closer and found himself somehow strangely moved by the parrot going into the river and coming out and shaking the water on another creature. He found himself so moved that he turned himself into a golden eagle and flew down from heaven to have a little closer look.

The little parrot was nearing the flames again when this huge golden eagle with feathers of molten gold appeared at his side and said, "Go back, little bird. This is a forest fire. You can't stop this. What can a few drops of water do?"

But the little parrot, of course, wouldn't listen. He continued to fly doggedly into the river and back into the flames.

"Stop, stop," said the great eagle. "Save yourself."

And the little parrot said, "I don't need a great shining eagle to give me advice, thank you. My mother could have told me that, you know. I just need someone to help."

And the great eagle, seeing the parrot flying so steadily through the searing flames, thought with shame about his own privileged life. He could see the carefree gods looking down on the earth as if life was just a game. He could hear their laughter, but he could also hear the cries of the creatures in the forest, crying out in fear. And all at once, he no longer wanted to be a god or an eagle or anything. He simply wanted to be brave like that parrot and to help.

"I will help," he said. And flushed with the feelings that arose in him, he began to weep. Streams of tears poured from his eagle eyes. And one of the interesting things that happens is when the gods weep, it turns into rain. As the great eagle began to weep, the clouds opened in the skies and rain poured down, cooling the fire, cooling the entire forest.

Deluged with the shimmering tears of the gods, the flames died down and the smoke began to clear. And the little parrot, washed and bright, rocketed into the sky above and laughed. He said, "Now that's more like it! Thank you to the great eagle."

Tears dripped from all the burned branches and scorched buds, but the water began to remind them that they could flower again. And all the animals looked at one another in amazement. Against the blue sky, they saw a little parrot doing loop-de-loops above the forest as the fire had stopped.

Or so it is told in the old ways, this story.

Now why do I tell this story? I think about the California fires. Some of you may have lost homes in Santa Rosa and other places. I tell it because I think that the only thing that really will motivate us to do what we have to do are those tears. We actually have to let ourselves feel, as that golden eagle did—the god who came down. The tears of that seven-year-old walking across the desert. The loss of the animals in the forest. The people who are trudging around the world as millions of refugees. Something has to be touched in us to say, it's not enough to be a bystander in this one. It simply is not.

And those tears become the tears of your loving care. As Gary Snyder said, if you're going to save it, there's only one way: you save it because you love it. And it's not just about recycling and using fewer shopping bags.

It just ain't at that level at this point.

I have a good friend, Paul Hawken, who wrote a book, a New York Times bestseller called *Drawdown*. How many people know this book? Great, twenty of you. There's another few hundred that will know it in a moment. Paul is a Marin visionary who's written many other things—a serial entrepreneur of different kinds, wrote *Blessed Unrest* about organizations changing the world.

What he did was to get a whole group of climate scientists and environmentalists and economists together. Let's make a list of the hundred things that are most likely not just to stop but to *reverse* climate change. Then he crowdsourced that list of a hundred and sent it out to graduate departments and think tanks and people around the world, each group taking one solution and working through the economics—what will it cost? The practicality. How many gigatons of carbon will it take out of the atmosphere? How long will it take? After a year, he brought all of that back together and made a list, a summary of the solutions that are most effective, not just to stop but to reverse climate change.

First thing is, they're all things that we already know how to do. It's not something new. Second, all kinds of new understandings came from this. For example, the first technological thing is not wind or solar, although they're in the top fifteen. The number one technological one is to create or distribute the small devices that will take the CFCs, the chlorofluorocarbons used in every old ice cream maker and air conditioner in Jakarta and Buenos Aires and around the world by the millions. Those gases are enormously destructive. And when they're drawn off, when they're retired and neutralized, that would do more for the atmosphere than all the solar power and wind power we can build.

Then in the top dozen is food waste. Pay attention to this. And agricultural practices. Synergies. Further down is methane from cows—cow belches and cow farts. You've heard about it, and how to mitigate it. But the synergies are fascinating. There's rebuilding kelp forests in the ocean. And I'm part of a company from friends who are doing that. It turns out if you put five percent of kelp into cattle feed, they don't fart. So there are all these things that were learned.

But the most important thing is it's not just the technological solutions. The number one solution, if you take two in the top ten and combine them together, the very number one intervention is the education and empowerment of women and girls worldwide. Not just for family planning—in Nigeria or in Kenya, fifty percent of the economy is done by women and smartphones. And they understand how to live and how to trade and how to grow things and how to educate their children in whole new ways when they are educated.

You can look at this. You can get the book. But even better, you can go to the website drawdown.com, because there's all kinds of things that you can do from this.

What's the point of all this? The earth wants to renew itself. It doesn't take that much—a little bit of water, a few seeds planted here and here and here, and then all of a sudden something happens and the earth knows, in some way. It's alive. It's part of you. When the governments tried to suppress the truth of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the wind told the story. The wind carried the truth across the nations. The wind was a poet, a scientist, and a prophet. The earth wants to work with us to renew itself. And we get to, like Tam Young Boon in that story, plant the seeds.

Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Prize for the green belts in East Africa—fifty-one million trees planted. She started one tree at a time. She spent some time in prison, like all good Nobel laureates, right? That's the way it happens. Fifty-one million trees, one tree at a time.

Or you look in Liberia, and Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Sirleaf, who said, "Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers. And now it's known for its women." Things can change. We have the possibility of changing this. And that's why *Drawdown* actually has a lot of hope in it. To raise your voices. To vote.

To teach people. To support. As your practice.

Because there's some way in which the culture—the consumer, misguided side of capitalism—wants to put you to sleep. It wants business as usual. It wants you to actually feel that you can't do anything, that you can't make a difference.

It's a lie. It's untrue.

Every one of us makes a difference on this earth. A significant difference. And your practice of awareness, of loving awareness and compassion, will lead you as you get quiet to reflect and choose a few things. I don't know what those actions will be. Some of you will be political. Some of you will plant. Some of you will support organizations. Some of you will do it in education. But when you feel empowered to make a difference, it will not only change the earth as you plant those seeds—it will also change your heart.

Because what else are you going to do in this time? You don't want to die feeling like you didn't do anything. You don't.

And how you do it matters. Yes, you want to act. But how you do it also matters—not out of anger, not out of fear, not out of hatred or aggression.

This from Molly Ivins, the great commentator and activist. She says: "So keep on fighting for freedom and justice and what's good, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous. Rejoice in all the oddities that humanity and freedom can produce together. And when you get through celebrating the sheer joy of standing up for what matters, be sure to tell those who come after you how much fun it was."

It's really a different spirit. It is. And it's what the earth wants of us as well.

Thank you all for coming and going on this ride, this adventure, as I try to deal with this—and I think as we all do together.

I end with a few words and a poem from Deena Metzger, an activist and friend. She writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

There is in this world of trouble and difficulty—the First Noble Truth—and of its causes of fear and separation. But there is another possibility. We know it in our hearts. We know it in our relationships with those we are closest to. We know it in our home of this earth. There is a possibility of love and compassion. And we can be emboldened and courageous with it.

It doesn't take a lot. Thomas Jefferson said, "One person with courage is a majority." And you look at Greta Thunberg—this one young teenage girl standing up in front of the British Parliament—and it's very clear who has the power. We have that in ourselves.

So maybe if you weep some of the tears like that parrot, maybe that's needed for us. But it's also needed somehow to go to the river and get the water and come back and plant the seeds. To carry this as part of your spiritual practice. You sit and you sweep the garden, and it doesn't matter how big the garden is.

So let's sit for a moment.

Thank you. Thank you so much. Drive politely out there—there are lots of cars. Take care with one another, and take care of this beautiful earth.

CHAPTER 87

Who Are You? The Mystery of Identity and the Gift of Discovery, Understanding and Joy

Jack Kornfield · 1h06

> *In this profound dharma talk, Jack Kornfield addresses one of the most fundamental questions of spiritual practice: Who are you? Drawing from conversations with his dying friend and fellow teacher Robert Hall, Kornfield explores how meditation reveals that we are not limited to our bodies, our conditioning, or the identities others have assigned to us. He shares the touching story of Ananda and Pakati from the Pāli Canon, illustrating how the Buddha taught dignity and respect transcend caste and social conditioning.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together teachings from diverse contemplative traditions—Thich Nhat Hanh's reflections on the deathless, Thomas Merton's mystical experience of seeing the 'secret beauty' in everyone, and his own teacher Ajahn Chah's instruction to rest in 'the one who knows.' Through the metaphor of the princess and the dragon shedding layers, he describes how meditation naturally releases the accumulated layers of fear, trauma, and false identity we carry.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on working with difficult mind states—doubt, judgment, restlessness—while recognizing that awareness itself cannot be stopped or diminished. Kornfield emphasizes that awakening isn't about perfecting the personality but about recognizing our true nature as timeless awareness, which allows us to hold our human experience with mercy, trust, and love. The teaching concludes with a powerful story of a bear nursing a lost child, pointing to how we are all being fed and held by the web of life.*

So as you sit, let yourself be at ease as you listen. In a way, this is a kind of reflection. It's not that teachings or these words are necessarily right or wrong, so much as perhaps a reminder at best of things that you know already that are true. So listen in that way, to sense what is of value, and the rest of it, just let it go by.

I was reflecting on what to speak about tonight. In part, I was thinking about the state of the world, something that I do talk about pretty regularly with concern. But then things got turned in a different way for me. I had a conversation with one of my dearest friends who used to be a senior teacher here at Spirit Rock, Robert Hall, who's now living down in Mexico in Todos Santos. I think Robert's eighty-six or eighty-seven. He's been pretty sick and he's nearly dying.

So I call him and I say, "Robert, have you died yet?" He'll say, "No, no, no, not yet." He said, "I'm hoping it's coming," because it's not easy. He's got heart problems and lung problems and pain and all kinds of other things. But we talk. I say, "So what's going to happen when you die, Robert? Here you've been this Dharma teacher." And he says, "I don't know. It's a mystery. But I do know that I'm not this body." He said, "I've had enough out-of-body experiences to know that this isn't who I am, that there's something vast and more mysterious, and not just the identity that we take in this human body as the end of the story."

We kind of play out different scenarios and so forth. And mostly at the end of our conversations, he's just grateful. He said, "You know, in the end, all that really matters is that we love each other." Not that complicated, is it?

Spiritual practice begins in some way with some very deep—and we could call them sacred—questions. Who are you? What is this life? What happens when you die? I remember Carlos Castaneda's teaching from Don Juan, where he says the trouble is you think you have time. And we don't actually know. So we live in this mystery. And then the Buddhist teachings say there's an invitation to that which is beyond birth and death, sometimes called the deathless. Now what could that mean?

So here we are. It's a late summer evening. As you came, the sun was starting to set. There's these beautiful golden hills and the San Geronimo Valley. And in each of us, there's an appreciation for beauty, this earth, along with its difficulty, and a longing for connection and wholeness. We also have our suffering, and we want to somehow find a way to live that reduces that suffering, that brings us a kind of liberation or ease or joy. Or we want to love better, or live more fully, or be more awake in some deep way—especially in a society that's so speedy.

I think it was Rollo May who said it's ironic that human beings seem to run faster when they've lost their way. And that could be so for a lot of our society as well, that it's moving really fast. Where are we going?

Or maybe our question is how to live fully. Or maybe our deep spiritual questions are about justice, dignity, respect—especially in a world where there's so much conflict, racism, divisiveness, tribalism, people mistreating one another. How do we find justice and dignity, and what are the teachings about it?

One of my favorite stories comes from long ago in the time of the Buddha. The Buddha's attendant, Ananda, was known to be a very warm-hearted man. People really loved Ananda. He was the gracious front man for the Buddha. When people would come and say, "I want to see him," Ananda was the person who tended to all of that. It also happened that Ananda was apparently quite good looking, but that's another thing.

So Ananda, the attendant to the Buddha, was sent by the Blessed One on a mission, and on returning, passed by a well near a village and saw a young outcast woman named Pakati. He asked her for water to drink. Now as a monk you can't ask for anything except water. You have to bring your bowl in silence, and either people feed you or they don't. But the only thing you're really allowed to ask for is water.

And Pakati said, "O monk, I am too lowly born, too humbly born to give you water to drink."

"Do not ask this of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of the untouchable caste."

Imagine a child being born into that reality—to be told you are lower than anyone else, that if your shadow falls upon the food of the higher castes, they cannot even eat it because it has been polluted.

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for caste, but for water, please."

Pakati's heart leapt joyfully. She gave Ananda water to drink, and he thanked her kindly and went away. But she followed him at a distance. Having heard that he was a disciple of the Buddha, she went to the Blessed One and said, "Please help me live in the place where your disciple dwells, so that I may see and care for him. For I have come to love Ananda."

She had fallen in love with this man. You know how that happens.

And the Blessed One understood the emotions of her heart. He said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you do not understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you, and practice it toward others. And though, Pakati, you are said to be born of low caste, you will be a model for the noble men and noble women of this land. Live a path of justice and righteousness, and you will outshine the royal glory of kings and queens."

There is so much beauty in this story because it is really a story of respect and dignity—of seeing the secret beauty that exists in every being, no matter what the conditioning may be.

In many ways, this question—*Who are we? Who am I?*—is central to awakening. In India, they say that babies will sing a little song: "Do not let me forget who I am." And then the second verse goes, "Oh, I'm forgetting already."

Who are we, really?

Here is a story from a remarkable book, if you don't know it, called *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Greg Boyle, who writes about his work with gang kids in Los Angeles. He started Homeboy Industries, and the book is filled with extraordinary stories.

Father Greg is working with a group of young kids at some camp where they've been sent. This guy swaggers in, and Father Greg asks, "What's your name?"

The kid scowls. "Sniper."

Father Greg says, "Okay, look, I've been down this block before. I have a feeling you didn't pop out of your mom and she took one look at your face and said, 'Sniper.' So come on, dog, what's your name?"

"Gonzales," he relents a little.

"Okay, now son, I know the staff here call you by your last name. I'm not down with that. Tell me, mijo, what does your mom call you?"

"Cabrón."

There's even the slightest flicker of innocence in his answer.

"Oh no, son, I'm looking for a birth certificate name."

The kid softens. Father Greg can tell it's happening, but there's embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability.

"Napoleon," he manages to squeak out, pronouncing it in Spanish.

"Wow," Father Greg says. "That's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your jefita calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yards. Come on, mijito—do you have an apodo? What does your mom call you?"

Then Father Greg watches him go to some far distant place, a location he hasn't visited in some time. His voice, body language, and whole being take on a new shape right before his eyes.

"Sometimes," the kid says, his voice so quiet Father Greg has to lean in. "Sometimes, when my mom's not mad at me... she calls me Napito."

And there it was—watching this kid transform from Sniper to Gonzales to Cabrón to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not angry with us.

But this is really the question: Who are we? Because we take on all kinds of personas. And then other people have their views of who we are.

The practice of mindful, loving awareness—and of loving-kindness and compassion—invites a shift of identity, both for ourselves and for how we relate to the world we are part of. These practices invite us to step out from that sense of separateness and protectedness that the kid described so beautifully. It is sometimes called the body of fear—the small sense of self, shaped by all the conditioning of someone who told you who you're supposed to be. And then you believed it.

There's a cartoon by Jules Feiffer, four panels. A man is sitting there somewhat reflectively, perhaps a little disconsolately. He says, "I inherited my father's philosophy and way of thinking about things."

Next panel.

I inherited my father's style and attitude toward the world. Next panel: I inherited my father's interests and way of acting. And in the fourth panel: I inherited my mother's contempt for my father.

Summed up in a few little panels. Like, who are you? You get all of that.

And it turns out, as you meditate, that you see all these layers—all the things you think you are and people told you are and you're supposed to be. And you get to step out of that into awareness itself.

You have your trauma. Everybody does. Everybody's been betrayed and everybody's betrayed somebody. Anybody not been betrayed? Raise your hand. You can have your ten dollars back or whatever it was.

You have your trauma, but the idea is not to be too loyal to your suffering. It's part of your life and it needs to be honored, but you're something bigger than this. And so the invitation of meditation is really to allow that identity to start to get stripped away in some way—not in a painful way, but to see through it.

I think about my teacher Dipa Ma Barua in Calcutta, who was one of the great meditation masters and yogis of India, a quite remarkable woman. She'd lived through so much suffering—the death of two of her children, then later the death of her husband, terrible illness. And that motivated her to meditate when she finally did. She realized that she couldn't count on the external things.

She had what almost everyone has at some point in their life: a death-rebirth experience. All that she believed mattered, all that she thought defined who she was, somehow was taken away, or she knew it wasn't who she was. And she had to find something else.

This is from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh:

This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I'm life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars. Since before time, I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass—sacred thresholds on our journey, a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand, let us say goodbye. We'll meet again soon, tomorrow. We meet in every day because this is who we are.

Now you listen to that and it sounds kind of beautiful but distant in a way. What does he mean?

He said, "I was living in my hermitage in a monastery in the hills of Vietnam, and it was a year after my mother died." He was very close to his mother, and he said, "I grieved for that whole year very deeply. And then one night in the middle of the night, I woke up and the full moon was shining in the window onto my face. I had the sense as the moonlight was caressing me that it wasn't just the moon, but that it was also my mother. I had a sense that she was there with me.

"I got up to walk along the tea plantation, and I had the feeling as I did that it wasn't my feet that were making steps in the damp soil under the moonlight, but it was our feet. It was my mother's feet and my grandparents' feet and my ancestors' feet. And I was just a part of this huge stream of life that was not limited to this body. And I knew that my mother had never died, that I could never lose her because we were one. We were together in this."

Does this make sense to you? You've had this experience, some of you anyway. And when you remember it, something remarkable starts to happen—a kind of courage and fearlessness and understanding.

Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic, was walking down the street in Louisville at Fourth and Walnut, I believe it was, in the center of the shopping district. And right now there's a monument there. It's the only monument that I know of that the government has put up to a mystical experience. But there it is, Thomas Merton's experience.

"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, and that they were mine and I theirs, and we could not be alien to one another. It was like waking from a dream of separateness and monastic holiness. The sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such relief and joy, I laughed out loud. I saw the secret beauty of every one that was passing. And the only problem was I wanted to fall down and worship each one as they went by. No more need for war, cruelty, or greed when we could see each other in this way. This is really the miracle—that each person that passed me is walking around shining like the sun."

It's not just a conjecture. If you actually do something very dangerous, like sit and look in someone's eyes for five or ten minutes—we can do it, you know—weird things happen. The face starts to change, and it's like, who are you? Who are you back in there? And you start to see that you're not the body, that there's some spirit that was born in.

When you meet someone who sees you in that way, just as Father Greg saw this young man and knew that he wasn't all the act that he had—well, in India, it's called the glance of mercy.

When I spend time with Ram Dass, dear friend, and he talks about his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, he describes being there and doing his Ram Dass act—former Harvard professor and traveler and LSD maven and all of that. He carried both his pride and his shame, like we all do. And he said, "My guru looked at me with so much love I could hardly believe it. Why would anyone want to love me in this way?"

In fact, he tells the story about after he was with his guru for a long time and had learned many things and was ready to come back to the US—his guru was sending him back. He said, "Now you need to go teach other people." And Ram Dass said, "I'm still uncooked. I still feel so imperfect." And his guru got up from the little wooden bench where he sat, stood up and peered up and down at Ram Dass very closely, then walked

around to the other side and peered, and went to the back and looked at him. He took about three or four minutes looking him over from his feet to his head. Then he sat down, looked at him, and said, "I see no imperfections."

That glance of mercy, that moment when somebody looks at you and sees your beauty and your worthiness and who you really are—in spite of all the personality we have and all the things we've done—all of that drops away. And what happens is you get to hold your identity, but you hold it a bit more lightly.

Now, I don't mean by this that you get a pass, that you can do the spiritual bypass and run. "We're all shining like the sun, hallelujah, and I don't have to deal with anything." As I think it was Auden, the poet, who said, "You need to love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart." We're kind of in it together.

As you learn how to sit and be present with loving awareness and a kind of fearlessness—and fearlessness doesn't mean you won't be afraid, but that you can be present even for the fear—then you feel the layers of things that are hard for you or that you've run from. Your loneliness, the grief and tears that have been waiting, because the unfinished business of the heart doesn't show itself till you sit quietly.

In the Lakota tradition, they say that grief is the emotion that brings you closest to the gods, that it's the tears that actually open the heart. You feel your own measure of pain, you sense all of these things and honor them. But they're not who you are. They're a part of life experience and they need to be held in some beautiful way and honored. Because until we can sit with the measure of pain and the tears that we have, we also aren't free.

I read repeatedly this passage from James Baldwin, bless him, where he writes, "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they'll be forced to deal with their own pain."

And so if we can't sit with our measure of tears and our insecurity and our fears and our grief and longing, then we project it on others—the Mexicans, the Muslims, the immigrants, the black people, the brown people, the yellow people, the gays, whatever. When I was young, it was the communists. They're coming back around now, right?

It's the enemy du jour because as a culture, we can't deal with the human insecurity that is our lot, and love our life instead of being so frightened about it.

But to be able to establish ourselves—and meditation means to sit with loving awareness and say, yes, this is our human nature. All of it. Not bypass it. And yet, as you quiet your mind and open your heart, you also discover that all that stuff isn't who you really are. It's part of the journey. It gives you lessons. It makes you weep and laugh and so forth. But it's not you.

Identity is a really interesting property of consciousness. I mean, we don't talk about this. We talk about the stock market, right? Or we talk about real estate, or we talk about medicine, or health, or creativity. But who talks about who we are? This mystery.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is a quality in the mind in which consciousness identifies with something. So I can demonstrate it. If I say, this hand is me, and this is something I want to feel—I can feel the hardness of the ring on my finger, I can feel these nails that are a little rough and need to be clipped. So this is me, and that's the object that I'm feeling, right? Now, I'm going to say, *this* is me. And I'll say, oh, these nails need to be clipped too, and the skin is a little rough, maybe I need a little goop or whatever that stuff is. And now this is me, and this is what I'm feeling.

Or I can identify myself with my body, but in a tragic way—if I lose some part of my body in an accident, I think this is my hand, but if I were to lose it, I'm still me without it, right? So I had that identity. I have to let it go.

I can identify with my family. Some of you might want to do that. Some of you might not want to, the way families go, right? I can identify with my gender or my sexual orientation or my tribe or my people, or my political point of view. When I'm with my parents, I was their son. When I'm with my daughter, I'm a father. And my identity switches all the time. I say, oh, this is who I am in this situation. But identity is actually quite fluid. So who are you if you have all these different identities? You're not your body, maybe. You're not your feelings.

All right, let's see how to explain this. We have this very limited sense of ourselves. There's a cartoon that shows two generals striding down the hall of the Pentagon with all their medals on, and one says to the other, "It really shook me, I can tell you—I dreamed the meek inherited the earth." We get identified with our views and our roles, and then we get in conflict with somebody else who's identified with a different view.

Or we get identified in modern society—we are a political person, or we're a healer. We've got all these different roles. We're consumers. Julia Child writes, "In department stores, so much unnecessary kitchen equipment is bought indiscriminately by those who have simply gone in for men's underwear." And we get caught up, and the whole society says, okay, now you're a consumer. That's who you are. It's kind of boring, really.

So who are we? Ram Dass again, thinking of him. He was teaching after coming back from India, in the early days when he was Baba Ram Dass and he had a beard and white robes and beads and things like that, doing the whole guru thing, teaching these beautiful mantras in Hindu practice. There was a woman sitting in the front row who raised her hand and said, "Ram Dass, Ram Dass, what's with the Hindu stuff? Aren't you Jewish? Come on already."

And Ram Dass said, well, yes, as a matter of fact, I was born Jewish. And I love the Jewish tradition. I love the Kabbalah and all the states of consciousness, the different levels that it describes. And I love the Hasidic masters who are like great Zen masters. And he was bar mitzvahed, as was I. And then he paused for a minute and he said, but remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side.

Of course, he was being very witty. But it was more than just witty. You are not limited by your family. And if you haven't learned that yet, I hope you learn it. Doesn't mean you can't love those people. But that doesn't define who you are—any more than Nelson Mandela coming out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island prison with such magnanimity and graciousness and compassion and courage, that he changed not only South Africa but the imagination of the world. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit, who you really are.

And so liberation, or freedom, is an invitation to step out from the body of fear, from that separate sense of self, and to see that you're something more than that. That you're timeless. That awareness itself—

Okay, let's do a little quick experiment. In a few seconds, when I tell you to, I want you to do whatever you can to stop being aware. You can grit your teeth, close your eyes, wiggle your tongue—whatever you have to do, stop being aware. Stop it. Okay? One, on your mark, get set, do it.

You can't do it, can you? Awareness is here. There are all these changing breaths and sounds and sensations and experiences and roles that come and go. But it turns out that underneath that is consciousness itself, a timeless awareness that's here independent of your body.

And you know it. When you go into the bathroom and look at yourself in the mirror, you will notice at certain points that you've aged, right? Come on. It starts to wrinkle and sag and lose its fur in some places and grow it in other places. It does all this weird stuff. How did you get in there anyway? But there it is and you're looking there. Okay, it's sagging there and whatever.

But the interesting thing is that you also have the experience that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? And that moment is because you see that the body has aged, but who you are is in that body. Who you are is this witnessing awareness saying, hmm, getting along in this incarnation, aren't we? And that's actually what's happening. In that moment, there's a revelation and a shift of identity from being caught in who you think you are to being that observer, that witness. My teacher Ajahn Chah called it resting in the one who knows, in awareness itself.

Now when you rest in awareness, it doesn't mean that you still don't have to care for this body and relationships and drive on the right side of the street and stop at red lights and go on green lights and so forth. It is again, as our dear friend Ram Dass likes to say, you need to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number. We live in this paradox as human beings that's both personal and universal, and you have to respect it. But it's not the whole game. In fact, it's not the deepest truth at all.

And something in you knows this. It knows in the simplest way when you come and sit in meditation and you have those moments where you're able to become the witness of experience, where you can see your life with a dollop of mercy and some tenderness and loving-kindness and loving awareness. And you let go of being so caught in those worries or those thoughts or those plans. It's not that they're not there. Or your doubt or your restlessness that comes—all those things will come. And you bow and say, oh, this is restlessness.

"I know you." And after a while, it doesn't have so much power over you.

And this is doubt: "I don't know, this and that." Everybody doubts. "Oh, that's the doubting mind. Thank you."

And then judging: "Okay, you're not doing it right. You're not a good meditator. And actually, you're not very good at other things either. And I have a whole list to tell you." And you say, "Oh, the judging mind. Thank you for your opinion." You know who recorded that. We won't talk about them.

And you start to realize that you can trust awareness to hold all of this—including, as I was talking with my dear friend Robert, including as you die. And as you do, there comes a growing sense of trust or ease, joy, the capacity somehow to be present for the ten thousand joys and sorrows that make up this mysterious human incarnation.

I mean, how did we get in here? I talk about it—the hole at one end in which you stuff dead plants and animals regularly and grind them up and glug them through the tube, right? And these weird protuberances—mine stick out quite a lot, you know—ears and eyeballs. Come on, it's bizarre. And then you make love. Now, making love is a

totally great thing. It's weird. You have to admit. It just is. Touching, licking, all those great things, fluids—I mean, come on. And there you are in the middle going, "Wow, this is fabulous. Isn't this weird?" Because it is. It is.

How did you get into that body? And who are you? Are you the animal body? Is that who you are?

And as you get quieter, again, and there comes the capacity to be at ease with the paradox of your human life, things start to unfold and open.

All right, I'll tell you a story, a kind of fairy tale about meditation.

It turned out that in a kingdom some time ago, there was a beautiful princess, as happens in these stories. But her father had borrowed a bunch of money from hedge fund guys and was indebted, actually, to the local dragon who had a great hoard of gold. Her father needed it for some reason—to build a new castle or pay his army or whatever. And he wasn't able to pay the dragon back.

So the dragon came and said, "Time to pay up." And the king said, "I can't do that." And the dragon said, "Well, our agreement was that if you couldn't pay up, I could ask you one wish for something. And what I wish is the hand of your daughter in marriage."

The poor king—his heart sank. How could you marry your daughter to a dragon? He didn't know what to do. He called the soothsayers. They weren't very helpful. And then someone whispered and said, "Oh no, go to the wise woman." So he sent his daughter. He said, "You go find this great wise woman who lives on the outskirts of the kingdom, and maybe she can help you."

So the daughter went, and the wise woman said, "Marry the dragon. No problem."

But the daughter said, "He's big and fiery and scaly and ugly. I don't want to marry a dragon."

And the old woman said, "Listen, it's going to work out. Trust me." You know, it's a fairy tale, right? "But you have to do something really important, and then it will work out." She said, "What? I'll do anything." "You need to buy ten wedding gowns and wear one on top of another."

Now I've learned, having a daughter, that the way weddings work, it actually doesn't matter as much who you marry—it's the dress that really matters. I have learned that. But nevertheless, in this case, it wasn't the dress, it was the dresses, all ten dresses. So she said, "You wear these to your wedding, and on the wedding night, then..." and she whispered some instructions.

So there they have the wedding. There's the dragon. There's the princess. There's the king weeping—you know, the whole way weddings go. And then they go into the bridal chamber for their night. And the dragon says, "Ah, wonderful. Now we get to become really intimate and make love. Would you please take off your wedding gown?"

And the princess says, "Of course I will, but I have one request of you—that when I take off my wedding gown, I'd like you also to take off a layer of your garments." Which of course was the dragon's scaly skin, like a snake. And so she removed a gown and the dragon shed his skin. And then he looked at her and she had another gown on. And she said, "Well, I have more gowns, so we have to do this for a while if you'd like to see me undress. Now I take off another gown, and you promised—you have to take off another layer of skin."

And as she took the ten gowns off, each time it got harder and harder, and the dragon had to use his claws and take off one more layer, and one more layer of skin. And finally he began to change form, as happens in fairy tales. And she took off the last gown. And he pulled off the last layer of dragon skin, and who should appear but a prince who'd been enchanted. You know how these things go. And he said, "Oh, you've done exactly the right thing to free me from my belief that I was a dragon"—his identity with dragon-ness, or whatever. And then they had a great time. We won't go there.

But this is something like meditation. Not in the sense that you have to use claws and pull things apart, but that as you sit, if you stay present, the body wants to release. It does. The things that are held tight start to let go. And the feelings want to let go. All the unfinished things in your heart—if you let yourself sit quietly, the tears you haven't shed, the longing that you have, the love that wasn't expressed, the fears that you have—all those things start to show themselves because you're willing to be present, and you let the skins that covered them open: your body, your emotions, and your thoughts to praise and blame and judgment. And you start to see, "Oh, that's just the mind doing its thing."

One of the problems you have is that you actually take your thoughts seriously. That's not actually a very healthy thing to do.

When my daughter Cindy was in first grade, we took a trip to California to visit my family. While we were there, she lost a tooth. She ran into the kitchen to show me and asked if the tooth fairy could fly this far. My mom shot back a look of concern and later suggested that by indulging such fantasies, I was teaching my child not to trust adults. Wasn't Cindy going to feel betrayed when she found out the truth?

So I was concerned about this. And when we were home, the next time Cindy lost a tooth and she came in bubbling with excitement, as I put her to sleep, she had a question. "How does the tooth fairy get in?" "Through the window," I explained. "Well, shouldn't we unlock it then?" she asked. "Oh, I do that right before I go to bed," I replied. "Why does the tooth fairy want everybody's teeth?" she asked.

I took a deep breath, considered my mother's concern. Cindy would soon figure out the truth anyway, so I told my inquisitive seven-and-a-half-year-old that in fact I was the tooth fairy. She cried hard. I apologized and explained that she was getting to an age in which it was more important for me to be honest with her than to play imaginary games.

We cuddled for a while. She stopped crying. She had one last question: "What do you wear?"

It's really hard to let go of our ideas and thoughts, our beliefs—personal beliefs about people, our political beliefs, our social beliefs. When you start to sit and quiet the mind, you begin to see that just as feelings and emotions will come—sad and happy and joyful and anxious and agitated—you start to realize that you can tolerate them. You do what the neuroscientists call expanding the window of tolerance, which in the old days was called opening your heart to your life. You grow that capacity.

And then you see the mind tell its stories, and you don't have to believe them all. You say, "Well, that's an interesting story," but you don't have to be so identified with them—with the feelings and the thoughts. This begins to give you a sense of choice. Instead of being caught in everything that comes, there's a kind of spaciousness that says, "Oh yeah, here we are, and maybe I don't have to believe that doubt or judgment or that anxiety or that fear or confusion. Thank you for trying to take care of me. I'm okay for now. I appreciate you trying to take care of me. I'm all right."

This sense of graciousness and ease and flexibility grows. It also makes you more empathetic to other people who are caught in their stories. You may have noticed some of them around you. The Buddha said those who cling to their views and opinions go around the world annoying people. That's sort of one of his jokes, I think.

In your practice of loving awareness, there comes the sense that who you are is not just the content of experience—that you become instead the witness to it, the consciousness that says, "Oh yeah, this too." This is really who you are.

My teacher Ajahn Chah had practiced for a long time as a young monk, very ardently, in the jungles and forests of Thailand and Laos, in the caves and so forth. He had all kinds of wild experiences—insights, and also a lot of struggles with his own mind and with the tigers and the elements. And then he opened to beautiful meditative states. Finally he went to see the greatest master of the day, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun, and told him all about his experiences. "I need some advice. What should I do next? Here's the insights, here's the samādhi, here's the light and visions, here's all the things I've been through."

The master looked back and said, "Chah, you missed the point. Those are just experiences. They're like movies that come on the screen—a war movie, a documentary, a romantic comedy, a cartoon. You'll see them all." He said, "Those are just the movies." He said, "There's really only one question that matters: Who's watching the movies? Who are you? Turn your attention back from the content of experience."

Even as you're listening to me now, who is it that's hearing these words? And even though it's a sort of strange thing to do—because we're so used to looking out—he said, turn back. You will find the space of awareness, that one that wouldn't go away when we tried to do that little practice of resting in that awareness. Become *sakkhi bhūto*, become the knowing, become the one who knows, the witness to it all. There is the place you will find the real freedom that you seek.

So as you practice, you realize that you can enter different identities, and you need to. When you go to the bank, you have to pretend to be that person who has that bank account, right? Mullah Nasruddin, the famous Sufi holy man and fool, went into the bank to cash a check one day, and they said, "Could you please identify yourself?" He reached in his pocket, pulled out a small mirror, and said, "Yup, that's me, all right."

You can enter your identities. But as Robert was saying, "I know that I'm not this body. My body's falling apart. It's not going to last many more weeks probably. That isn't who I am. I know that that's true." Like Thich Nhat Hanh describing it in this very beautiful and deep way.

So the goal of meditation isn't so much to improve your personality. Yes, I could use a little improving, I know, but it's not really to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love and to remember that you're so much bigger than all the small self-limitations, that your awareness itself was born into this body and you can rest in it. And it gives you a kind of graciousness and ease and a sense of trust that you can be here for this life.

I have so many stories that I brought to read to you or tell you. Trust. This is from Deena Metzger, activist and poet. She's been an anti-nuclear activist, a peace activist her whole life. She was also a woman who, some decades ago, had a mastectomy and then had a giant dragon tattooed across her chest. There was a famous photograph that circled all over—she had one hand in the air, one breast here and one dragon there, with a huge smile on her face. Like, "Okay, this is who I am now." Quite remarkable. And she writes as a poet: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

Because what starts to happen as you let yourself step back and rest in the awareness that is who you are, is you see that life wants to renew itself. Yes, you will go through times that are difficult. Anybody not have those? And you're a survivor. Your ancestors survived so many things and they gave that to you. You know how to do it. You let go of certain identities and new ones will arise. You let go of certain things that you've been and cling to—that's not who you are. And then something else will come. As surely as the rains that will come this fall on these brown hills.

I love that day after the first rains, when you see the little green grass sticking up in between all those dry, dead stalks that are there. Underneath there's this little carpet and it absolutely comes every time. And you start to realize that you can trust life, that actually you *are* life, as Thich Nhat Hanh said. I'm not separate from my mother. I'm life now coming in this form, but I'm actually part of the whole web of life.

Alice Walker put it one way. She said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was. And it come to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laugh and I cry. I run all around the house." In fact, when it happens, you can't miss it. And you know it. You know it from times of making love, or listening to a magnificent piece of music, or walking in the high mountains, or taking some sacred medicine if that's your path, or just looking really deeply in the eyes of another being, or being there when a child is born out of your body, or sitting there when it happens, or holding the hand of somebody who dies.

This will happen, by the way, just in case you've forgotten. It will happen. And that mysterious moment when spirit leaves the body and then it's just a corpse—it's not who that person was. It's an extraordinary moment. It's silent and huge at the same time. The gates between the worlds open and it's silent like a falling star. And yet something opens.

I mean, who are we?

And when you meditate, you start to realize that you can rest in this timeless awareness, that it's a gift given to you and a trust starts to grow—that you can be here for this world and care for it.

Aldous Huxley writes, "An idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity. Endless progress is the devil's work demanding human sacrifice on an enormous scale. An idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity." So the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. Can we feel ourselves in the turning of the world, of the galaxies that we're a part of? And that perspective gives us graciousness and space and a certain kind of ease and surrender and a deep trust.

Like Pablo Neruda writes, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's something bigger than anything that human beings can do. It doesn't mean we don't have to take care with climate change, but there's something vast that we're a part of in the end. And you can feel that you're being fed by the world, and live in it, and love it.

So a story for you as we get near the end here. This comes from Barbara Kingsolver, wonderful writer. She writes about how on a cool October day in the oak-forested hills of Loristan, just in the north of Iran where the huge mountains are, a child was lost.

The way the story goes, it's a nomadic tribe of people, the Lori people. They were tending their flocks. They'd given a few of the young children into the charge of an older child, as has always been done among their people. And all of a sudden, one of the teenagers comes running back down the hill and says, "I can't find him, I can't find him."

It turns out that one of the littlest children, who could walk some but was really pretty small, was gone. They all run up to look, and they look everywhere, and the whole village gets mobilized. They cannot find this child. It's near the end of the day. The older girl brings back the other three children, and they get torches and they go

around, and they cannot find the child. Everyone is heartbroken. How can she survive that night out in the cold mountains with not many clothes, this little girl? The parents are frightened and weeping and no one knows what to do.

And then someone said they'd seen a bear. And they say, "Oh no, not a bear, not a bear."

Just as dawn comes the next morning—because in their torchlight they couldn't find the child—they go up out into the forest carrying what they can, looking everywhere. And finally they say, "Well, maybe we have to walk further. She was such a little child, but maybe she walked up to where the caves are."

So they go up to the area of the forest that meets the face of the mountains where there are these caves. And they start walking along them, heartbroken. The baby's really still small. At the mouth of the fourth or fifth cave—nobody knows—they hear a child cry. They can't imagine, and cautiously they look in the darkness, and ominously they smell bear. But the little girl is in there, crying and alive.

They peek inside the cave and wait. It smells dank. And then they see against the wall not a dark hollow but the dark rounded shape of a thick-furred, quiescent she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child, and the bear is curled against her, protecting her from the fear-smelling intruders that have come. They light their torches, they make sounds, they bang on things, and they manage somehow to scare the bear enough that it comes bounding out of the cave. And they ran into the cave and grabbed the child.

Kingsolver says she went back, found a friend who speaks Farsi, another who spoke Arabic. She wanted the original story because what happened was that this little girl was alive, unscarred and perfectly well—and it had been three days of searching. Well fed and smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child.

How could this happen? She wanted to know. She heard all the accounts. How was it possible that a huge hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than make her into food? But she was a mammal, a mother. She was lactating, so she must have had young of her own, maybe lost one, killed. So she was driven by the pure chemistry of maternity to take the small, warm neonate to her belly and hold her there gently.

You could read this story and declare it impossible, even though many witnesses have sworn it was true. Or you could read this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places. Think of the unquenchable, unconquerable force

of a mother's love. The fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals. You could think of all that and say, "Of course the bear nursed the baby. She was crying from hunger and the bear had milk. Small wonder."

You too are being fed by the universe. You are fed by the fields and the fruit of the trees and all that's grown and those who carry it to you. You are in this web of life that's feeding you and holding you and caring for this incarnation that you have.

And as you get quiet and listen, and there comes a sense of mystery and eternity—here we are for a short time in this incarnation, in this human body—there grows somehow a deepening sense of trust, of connection, of love. Because it's us all together.

And a kind of fearlessness that we know we're not just the limited circumstances of our life, that we're so much more than that. You know that you are a child of the spirit, that you carry that secret beauty that Thomas Merton saw shining in the eyes of every single person that walked by at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky on that spring afternoon. They put a national monument there to a mystical experience. You know it in some way. And when you know it, it changes everything.

It's not that you still don't have to go to work and change diapers and all that stuff. You do. But there's a kind of freedom that comes where you can play, trust, love anyway, delight, remember—all of those things.

So I feel a kind of gratitude that we have this capacity to awaken, to recognize who we are and to see each other this way. And if somebody says, "Well, why would I meditate?" Yes, it's good for stress reduction, right? Maybe it helps you with weight loss or whatever you want to do. That's fine. But it's something so much deeper and more beautiful than that. It's quieting the mind and opening the heart and being willing to live in the mystery of life in this way.

So let's sit for a moment. And as you get quiet and remember, you can sense in the end that what really matters is love. What else? What else could there be?

I was given a lovely work of art this evening by a little girl who came up. It expresses something of what we're talking about—that spirit. It's still in there, that child of the spirit. It is.

So it's time to go out in the parking lot and drive politely because there's lots of people there. And to go out into the beautiful summer evening. Maybe before you do, you could just look around for a moment, take thirty seconds, and catch the eyes of somebody and see that secret beauty that's there. Because it is. And then carry something of benefit and blessing as you leave the temple.

Thank you for coming. Good night.

CHAPTER 88

The Wisdom of the One Who Knows

Jack Kornfield · 1h07

> *In this rich and heartfelt talk, Jack Kornfield explores what his teacher Ajahn Chah called 'the one who knows'—the awakened awareness that can hold all of life's joys and sorrows with wisdom and compassion. He illuminates two essential dimensions of this knowing: the timeless witness consciousness that remains untouched by the arising and passing of experience, and the engaged wisdom that sees clearly how life works and responds with care.*
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> *Kornfield draws from personal stories—including a profound meditation with his dying twin brother and lessons from his daughter during difficult times—to illustrate how we can rest in vast awareness while simultaneously tending to the particulars of our lives. He weaves together teachings on impermanence, the paradox of form and emptiness from the Heart Sūtra, and the Buddha's understanding that suffering increases through greed, hatred, and delusion, while freedom comes through letting go.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that happiness is a matter of heart rather than accumulation, that we need each other in ways we often forget, and that each person carries a unique song worthy of recognition. Kornfield concludes with the inspiring story of Sri Lankan activist Ari Ratana's 500-year peace plan, reminding us that planting seeds of compassion and wisdom —regardless of when we'll see results—is the revolutionary act of one who truly knows.*

Please let yourself sit in a way that's comfortable and at ease, and listen in a kind of meditative practice of listening. For more than anything, the teachings are a reminder of things that you already know to be true. And if they do remind you, excellent. And if they seem off-base, then throw them out.

The Dharma is a compound, complex word that means all kinds of related things. It means the truth, it means the path of awakening, the teachings—all kinds of things. The gates of the Dharma are open and welcome everyone. Whatever your background, whatever your race, whatever your caste, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your ability, whatever identity you take—that's kind of the outer stuff, and all of that's welcome here. But more than anything, it welcomes your good hearts and that which you know inside. It's a place of reminder to that.

Last night I was part of a dialogue on stage at Stanford for a big crowd with Tim Ryan, who just last week decided to drop out of the presidential race. I think there were just too many people and he wasn't getting the numbers. He's a good guy. He'd written a

book called *Mindful Nation* about the power of meditation and mindfulness to change education and healthcare and all kinds of things that we know from modern neuroscience. It's helpful. He gave a copy to everyone in Congress. On stage I said, "So Tim, did any of them read it?" He said, "No." I said, "Well, do you have anything to tell us? Now that you're not on the campaign trail, can you say some real things?"

And he said, "Yeah, I want to start with something for you. I've been for the last eleven months going around the country, especially certain states—Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, various other places as well. And I just want you to know that you're not alone in your anxiety, in your concern, and in your suffering." He spoke of people who are worried economically, people who feel the weight of economic disparity, people who are suffering because of the increased hostility in the discourse, people who are suffering because of racism, people who can't get healthcare, people who are suffering because the education system isn't really working for their children. He went on and on. He said, "There's a lot of struggle out there, and don't think that it's you. Because it's not. It's us. And the only way that something is going to get changed to really make it healthy for us as human beings is if we can somehow find a way to do it together."

I found that to be very moving.

Then he said the meditation practice he used on the road from one campaign stop to another was more than anything a compassion practice. He did a Tibetan form of compassion called Tonglen, where you breathe in the suffering of the people that you meet and know and sense, and breathe out compassion and love. He said that was the only thing that kept him sane. So it was very moving actually.

And again, the way of the Dharma is to see things as they are, to speak what's true, to see things deeply.

My dear friend Robert Hall, who was one of the founding teachers at Spirit Rock—a physician and the founder of Lomi training, body and mind therapies over many decades—died a few weeks ago. We'll have a memorial here on the twenty-fourth of November. I was thinking about the Robert stories I was going to tell at the memorial, and one of the most striking ones for me was this: We had a men's retreat. We did ten years of running men's retreats, and in the evening after people sat and walked all day, we would have a circle of men sit in the middle. There were topics like fathers and sons, or men and money, or sexual history. All of them had a lot of confusion and suffering in them. What does it mean to be a man? Nobody quite knew.

At one point in one of those circles, a man raised his hand, looked at Robert and said, "I don't feel safe."

Robert took a breath, looked back at him, and said, "You're not."

And actually, that's our human condition. We could try to make it safe and do things in appropriate ways to take care of ourselves. But the reality is that we're never really safe from change. We're never really safe from things—pleasure and pain changing, gain and loss. It could change like that. And he just looked at him and said, "This is the way that it is. Now, knowing this, can you speak from your heart and say what's true for you?"

So these are reminders, if you will, of things that we know and need to remember.

And meditation, which we just did together for a time, is not in order to become a good meditator or a good breather. You already breathe fine. It's called insight meditation, and insight meditation means that as we quiet the mind and open or tend the heart, it becomes possible to see the way that life is with a sense of wisdom and connection and a freedom of spirit in the midst of it all.

It invites a shift of identity from the small sense of self that's self-absorbed—what's called the body of fear, which we all have—to realize that that's not who you really are. That's part of your personality, and you can adopt it and take it for a walk and be nice to it, but that's not your true identity.

What happens as we meditate, if you have a meditation practice, is you expand what the neuroscientists call the window of tolerance for life, for your capacity to be present with the losses and gains and fears and hopes and pleasures and pains that make up your life. More and more, you begin to be able to trust—trust that awareness itself can hold all of this, your awareness. And you can trust that your own heart, the great heart of compassion that was born in you, is big enough to hold this world. You learn to do it by sitting still and then having to bear witness to everything that's there.

This awakening that happens as you practice, my teacher Ajahn Chah called awakening the one who knows—awakening that wisdom in ourselves. And it has a couple of dimensions. One is a timeless dimension of the witnessing of all things. And one is a wisdom dimension that actually engages in the world.

The timeless dimension: You are consciousness. It was born into your body. It will leave your body. You'll be surprised when it leaves. Wow, that was quite an incarnation, wasn't it? You'll see. And in the timeless dimension, when you rest in awareness, things appear and disappear, but who you are is not affected by the arising and passing of

things. There's a sense, rather, that you rest in the present, eternity, the vastness of space. Things appear and disappear on the screen, but who you are is the witness to all of it.

One way to understand this that I like to talk about is when you look in the mirror and you notice you've aged. It starts to sag and droop and wrinkle and either lose its fur certain places or get more fur other places. It does all kinds of weird stuff, as teacher Wes here says. The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard, and it's just—okay, this is aging. But the weird thing is you don't necessarily feel older. You know what that's like? You look in the mirror and think, oh, hmm, wrinkling and drooping, but you don't feel that. That's because in that moment you're becoming the witness of the body. You look and say, oh, look what's happening to it. There's a place of awareness that can see what's there without being so identified with it, sort of stepping outside to take a look. How's it going? Oh, it's this age now. This is what's happened to it. But you're the conscious awareness of it all. Does this make sense? That simple.

When my twin brother died a few years ago—and I've talked about this once or twice before in these past few years—he was a scientist, a very creative scientist. A geneticist and a population biologist and a world explorer. He was a member of the Explorers Club. He did all kinds of amazing underwater genetic studies in the great lakes of the world—like Titicaca in the Andes, and Lake Baikal in Siberia, and Lake Malawi in Africa, where he spent a year in the water doing research. He did all kinds of other stuff too.

Anyway, there he was, and he was dying, and we were talking about it. I asked him, "You know, you belong to the Explorers Club. It has people who went to the South Pole and the North Pole and the Moon. Do they allow inner explorers?" He said, "No." He was definitely an outer explorer kind of guy. I said, "Well, what do you think happens when you die?" And he said, "I'm a scientist. You go back to dirt. It all comes from your brain." I said, "Well, that's an interesting thought. But a lot of people in the world don't believe it." And I talked about my out-of-body experiences and past life memories, all kinds of stuff. I said, "So when you die, you know, it might not be what you think."

I wondered, could I teach him meditation? No, way too late for that. Besides, you have to want it anyway.

But then at some point I said, "I'll tell you what. Just to let you know how it works for me, I'm going to meditate with you, but I'm going to meditate out loud."

So I was sitting with him—he was lying down, as I recall—and it was not that many days before he died. I closed my eyes and said, "I just want to get quiet," which I did for a while, tuning in with presence, because we're twins also, so it was very close. "And notice with mindful awareness, loving awareness, what's happening." I said, "I can feel my breath. My body's quieting."

I opened my eyes again and gazed at him. "Oh, all of a sudden I feel this wave of icy cold come into my body, and it's mostly in my genitals and my pelvis. It's like ice, and it's pretty intense." Then I said, "That's death. And it's beginning to take over your body." It just came to me.

He said, "So what do you do?"

I said, "Oh, you pay attention to it. Because it's opening and changing." Then I said, "Oh, my attention is now moving up to my chest and the area of my heart. And it's getting all warm, as opposed to that icy part. And I feel this radiance of love—that we've loved each other from back when we were in the womb, and maybe lifetimes before that. And it's so strong. It feels like it doesn't matter whether you're here in body or not. It's just our connection. It's how it is."

I sat quietly further and said, "Oh, now my attention has shifted up to my head. But I don't have a head. It's like if I close my eyes and feel, it's more like space and silence." I said, "This is the place where I meditate quite a lot. It's a place of vastness and stillness and awareness that can be aware of birth and death, pleasant and unpleasant, experiences appearing—but it's not limited by any of that. It's the timeless awareness. It's consciousness, which is what we are. And I'm just going to rest in this for a time."

"You may find this when you die. You may discover you leave your body, float out, there's light, there's a little life review. 'Wow, what an incarnation that one was!' You're a scientist, so you have to keep a little bit of an open mind. And if it happens, remember—I told you so."

This is the timeless wisdom of the one who knows. It's the one from Juan Ramón Jiménez's poem: "the one who remains standing when you die." It's that spirit that was born into you—spacious, luminous, silent, and mysterious. It's filled with love and appreciation. It has all these qualities of gratitude, but it's vast.

Aldous Huxley says an idolatrous religion is one that substitutes time for eternity. And it's really an invitation to step out of the drama of our life and ask, "Who are we really?" That's the timeless witness. And you can practice in meditation as the awareness itself, the loving awareness, resting in awareness and noticing the play of experience, beginning more and more to trust this openness.

Now, the second dimension of the one who knows I would call the wisdom dimension. Your capacity to be present and to have this timeless witnessing now lets you look at human incarnation and say, "Well, what are the rules? What is this that I've got?" Because yes, you're timeless awareness, but you're more than that, aren't you? As Ram Dass says, you have to remember your Buddha nature *and* your social security number. You've got these different dimensions of your life.

And so you start to see the rules of human incarnation, because you quiet the mind and open the heart in some way.

He writes about meeting a Zen master forest ranger out in the woods on a beautiful hike one day. He said he was hiking, and there was this young woman who was a forest ranger. She asked him, "Do you have any questions?" He said she was cute, so he flirted and said, "Are time and space real?" She looked back at him and said, "What you love is real," and turned away. He said, "Okay, I met the Zen master today in the form of a forest ranger." He was being a smart aleck, and she really took it up a notch. What you love is real.

So the wisdom dimension of the one who knows sees the impermanence of things. It sees that what matters in the end is not so much holding on to things, but that things change and that life is short—and therefore all the more precious.

A poem for you, by Kay Ryan, called "The Niagara River":

As though the river were a floor, we position our chairs and tables upon it, eat and have conversation. As it moves along, we notice—as calmly as through dining room paintings, and as though dining room paintings were being replaced—the changing scenes along the shore. We do know that this is the Niagara River, but it's hard to remember what that means.

It's a kind of intense poem, isn't it? And yet it's also very real. It's the one who knows, the wisdom part, that's saying: What is this game of life? It's short. It changes. You can't hold on to things.

Here's another poem:

My friends, let's grow up. Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here. Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice. Look, everything that can be lost will be lost. It's simple. How could we have missed it for so long? Let's grieve our losses fully like ripe human beings. Love fully and let them go. But please, let's not be so shocked by them. Let's not act so betrayed. Impermanence is life's only promise to us. To a child, she seems

cruel. But she's only wild. And her compassion, exquisite. Brilliantly penetrating, luminous with truth. She strips away the unreal to leave us with what is real—which is consciousness itself, which is who we are.

So the one who knows somehow doesn't paper over the way things are, but sees: this is the game. And it allows you actually to be more courageous, more honest and straightforward, and to have a different set of values. Because if you only had a few weeks to live, or a month or two or three, what would you do? Who would you call? What would you say? Why do you wait?

The one who knows, in the space of loving awareness, also allows you to become more comfortable with the paradox of human incarnation. The Heart Sutra begins with the lines: *Form is not different than emptiness. Emptiness is not different than form.* This is the expression of the mystery in another language. Things appear and they disappear. They are fundamentally empty. Where is your childhood? Where is 2018? Where is Y2K?

Where is whatever happened last month, or yesterday, or this morning? It went back into the void where it came from. And the only place to find it is back with the pyramids and the dinosaurs. It's gone. That is really wild, this incarnation. Things appear and then they're gone. This is called emptiness. Check it out. We think it's also solid. Come on, take a look. Form is not different than emptiness. This is who we are.

And so there is the sense of vastness. And yet with the vastness, there also comes a tenderness, a courage to say: Things are only here once like this. There's no day that can be repeated. Nothing can be repeated. It's always some variation, something new. What does it mean to honor this? To love it and also to be open to the next thing. And to see that form and emptiness, praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death—those are the dualities that make up incarnation. It's how it is. And that's what makes up a human life. Instead of thinking you did it wrong, or you have pain, or things disappear, or there's suffering because you're doing it wrong—it's just how duality works. And it's part of who you are in the incarnation form that you've taken.

This from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist and very powerful voice for freedom, writing out of the Gulag archipelago of Siberia when he was in prison. He says: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

So you start to see that you contain everything. You do. This is what mind is. It contains all these possibilities and all the roles that you take. We are men of parts, says Shakespeare. We have all these roles—and women of parts—in this world. And so in this, the one who knows is not like, "Okay, let's do the spiritual bypass and just make everything calm." You actually have to be present for the life.

In the monastery, we not only had the vastness, but we also had these exquisite rituals—like you'd see in a Zen temple—how you pour the water, how you fold your robes. Everything was cared for.

A story for you. In one of the great forests in Africa, a dark forest called the Forest Dukaduk. It was that dark at night, and scary. The name Dukaduk was actually the sound your heart made when you went into it.

There was a village, and one young man who had a number of cows had secretly found a clearing in the forest where he would take them. There was beautiful green grass for the cows to be nourished. But then his milk cows, at one point, started to lose their milk. Not all of it, but less than they should have produced in that beautiful green grass. Someone was stealing the milk.

So he decided—dukaduk as his heart was beating—that he would go at night and wait and see what was happening in that forest and who was stealing the milk from his beautiful cows. He hid behind a tree and waited for hours until the moon came out, and a beautiful young woman carrying a large basket that was sealed to carry liquid rode a moonbeam down from the heavens. She milked the cows, filled her basket, and headed back up into the sky.

Astonished by this, he—as in all these kinds of stories, you know how it works—came back another time and set a little trap, a rope or something, and caught this young woman. He demanded to know who she was. She said her people were sky maidens, and they lived in the sky. But they didn't have milk there. It was her job to take this beautiful milk and bring it back to the other people in the sky. She pleaded to be set free, promising to do whatever he asked.

And he agreed. He said, "I will set you free, but only if you marry me." You know how these things work in the fairy tales, right?

So she agreed. She went home, and some days later came back carrying a beautiful wooden box with her. She said, "I will be your wife. We will have a happy marriage, but you must promise never to look inside this box."

Well, uh-oh.

And for months the couple were happy together, but one day while his wife was out, curiosity got the best of him and he looked inside the box. To his surprise, he discovered nothing inside.

When the sky maiden returned, she saw his face and she knew. "You looked inside the box, didn't you?" We know, you know. The one who knows is checking things out, right? She was devastated and a tear trickled down her cheek. She said, "I'm sorry, I can't live with you any longer."

"Why? Why?" And he began to cry. "What's so terrible about my peeking into an empty box?"

"I'm not leaving because you opened the box," said the young woman. "I'm leaving because you said it was empty. It wasn't empty. It was full of space and sky, full of light and air and the vastness of the place that I come from, full of openness. When I went back to the sky village the last time before we married, I opened the box and filled it with what was precious to me—the openness and vastness that's precious to me. How can I be your wife when what is most precious to me is not clear to you, is emptiness but not the right kind of emptiness, meaningless to you?"

And sadly, as these stories go, she went back up to join her people.

We are wedded to emptiness. It's true. We are wedded to impermanence. We are wedded to the fact that things don't last. This is our mortal dilemma, if you will. And yet, we actually have to tend it and love it. As a poet wrote: "No matter what we are and who, some duties everyone must do. A poet puts aside his wreath to wash his face and brush his teeth. And even earls must comb their curls. And even kings have underthings."

And this is it, you know. It's both empty and yet at the same time—or ephemeral, ever-changing—and at the same time, here we are. We have this remarkable life, the unique one that we're given. The one who knows sees this and becomes comfortable with the paradox of life, with both vastness and the tenderness to care for things.

The one who knows also knows that happiness isn't found by collecting and grasping things. The noble truths of the Buddha, which Tim Ryan was really talking about: There is suffering in life. Not that life is suffering, but it has suffering. Anybody not have that? Please raise your hand. I want to meet you. And human suffering increases the more greed, hatred, and ignorance there is. Those are the causes of human suffering—grasping and greed and hatred and fear and ignorance. Those cause our suffering.

But it's not the end of the story. There is a freedom that can be found as we let go of greed and hatred and ignorance. And then there comes a happiness that's not dependent on owning things. You all know this. It's fine to have some money and it's fine to have a job, and these things give you meaning. But you and I both know—I know some people who are incredibly wealthy who are unhappy. And I know people in refugee camps where I've been who had nothing and yet possessed an amazingly joyful spirit. Because happiness is really a matter of heart.

Socrates said he loved to go to the marketplace to see all the things he was happy without—window shopping, I think they call it, or something like that. And Thoreau put it this way: he said men go fishing without understanding that it's not fish they're after. It's not the fish, but the stillness and the openness and the presence of life.

So meditation isn't about some grim duty. It's a willingness to find the happiness in yourself. As Guillaume Apollinaire says, now and then it's good to pause in your pursuit of happiness and just be happy. Not for a reason, but because you are here in this marvelous world. And then you tend to it and care for it and all those things, but you don't do it in a depressed way. I assure you, when you go to a refugee camp, people don't want you to come in depressed and weeping and gnashing your teeth. It doesn't help them a lot. They're actually more interested in those who carry some joy, who can meet that in them.

I remember talking with my daughter, who is—as we fortunate people are, sometimes our children are wiser than we are—quite lovely. It was a bit more than a decade ago when I was in the middle of a very sad and painful divorce, which happened in part because my ex-wife and I are so much opposites and different. She's profoundly introverted and quiet, and I have—how do we say it—a big life of people and travel and all these things. We're just at opposite ends of the spectrum. And after especially after my daughter left, it was like we were in just different worlds. She said she didn't want that, you know, and it takes two to stay married. So, sadly, because I'm a loyal person, but that's how it was.

We went through getting a divorce, and I sat down with my daughter one day and I said, "Caroline, your parents are getting divorced. You're twenty-four, twenty-five years old. They're still your mommy and daddy, right? I know it's hard. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?"

And she said, "Yeah, dad. Be happy." She said two things: "Dad, first, be happy."

It's a fantastic thing to say. Our children actually want to see us be happy, and it changes them to know that that's possible.

I said, "Yes, and the second thing?"

"Get the damn divorce over with. Get on with your life."

I could have paid her. Now she's a lawyer. She does this wonderful asylum law for Oasis Legal Services in Berkeley, with a bunch of other hotshot Berkeley lawyers, for LGBTQ people whose lives are in danger from around the world. She'll get a gay man from Uganda who'd be stoned to death. She had a transgender woman from Saudi Arabia who came to a different kind of Mecca—you know, the Castro or whatever. She has all these people come who've had—I don't even need to say—who've suffered incredible abuse or loss or rape, torture, all those kinds of things. And her work is to get them asylum and help. She and her lawyers win ninety-nine percent of their cases. So it's like, go girl.

But anyway, she was wise. And this is what's possible for you, says the Buddha. Live in joy even among those who are troubled or who are sick or in difficulty. Live with joy and a peaceful heart. You can do this, and it makes a difference to yourself. It's an act of courage. And it makes a difference to the life you live and those around you. It doesn't mean you don't see the grief and weep the tears you need to.

The one who knows sees how much we need each other—the inescapable mutuality, the single garment of destiny that Martin Luther King talked about. And again, Tim Ryan was saying, listen, climate change, racism, economic injustice, the bankrupt parts of our electoral system, either because of all the money pouring in or voter suppression—he said these will not be fixed by one problem being solved or one segment solved. We have to do this together, and we need each other in some very deep way.

It's a great mistake, says David Whyte, to act the drama as if you were alone, as if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witnesses to the tiny hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Put down the weight of your loneliness and ease into the conversation.

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

We need each other. And there's a deep sense—you know what Chief Seattle said: we are all connected. For if all the beasts were gone, men would surely die from a great loneliness of spirit. What happens to the beasts happens to humankind. We know this in our hearts.

The one who knows in us sees all of this. And we're asked to both hold it in the great heart of compassion, which is part of that vastness, and to say, "Yes, we won't turn away, we won't deny this. And we will do what we can together to make a difference."

The one who knows sees with the eyes of the beloved. Mother Teresa says the problem with us is that we draw our family circle too small. In most other cultures where I've lived—in many places around the world—the common parlance for speaking of others in Africa and Asia and Latin countries is family honorifics: auntie, uncle, brother, sister, grandmother. They're all seen as relatives. And you know, when you go way back, some of you have pirates back there. You know you do. Some of you have been pirates in this life, but we won't go there for the moment.

Ram Dass says, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." You know how it works.

But the one who knows sees, as Thomas Merton did, the Christian mystic walking down the street in Louisville. There's this great government plaque commemorating his mystical experience. He said, "I saw the secret beauty in the eyes of everyone passing. If only they could see each other as they are—they're shining." He said the big problem was that he wanted to bow down and worship each one as they went by.

Here's a story from a Spirit Rock practitioner. Last year she disembarked from a flight at Kuala Lumpur Malaysian Airport. She groaned upon walking into a mammoth customs area. The place was packed, the lines stretched as far as one could see. The air conditioning was on the fritz. She realized this was going to be a very lengthy, hot shuffle that would only end with a standard stamp and dismissal from a disinterested or borderline hostile customs officer.

"What a drag this is going to be," she whined for some minutes as she scanned the whole arena. "I'll be here for hours." Finally, heaving a sigh, she started chanting metta for herself: "May I be safe, healthy, happy, free from worry." And as she did, she began to notice the people around her. Some appeared impatient and put out like herself, but there were unconcerned little children having fun and teasing. She saw colorful faces and bodies and clothing representing cultures from all over the world. And she began to spread the metta, saying metta for them and wishing the best for each one on their journey. "Metta for you, and you, and you. Metta for the whole lot of us in here."

She went on and on for an hour or two. Still chanting inwardly, she eventually approached the station. Her turn came to face a tired-looking, mustached clerk as she placed her passport on the counter. He glanced at her, scanned and stamped her docu-

ment, and looked her in the eyes as he slid the passport back. "What a fine photograph. You have a wonderful smile," he beamed in his Malaysian-accented English. "Welcome to Malaysia." She felt like she was walking on air all the way to baggage claim.

So this is the one who knows—that says we're in this together. We all have our suffering and we all have our magnificent beauty. And why not love each other? Why not see with the eyes of compassion and recognize that we are connected?

And it doesn't take long. Five minutes of metta on BART or the Metro, or in busy traffic wishing well to all those other cars. By the way, you are traffic too. And they're thinking of you that way. So don't think it's just them—you are part of the problem, right? But it changes things to do that. And the one who knows realizes this is true.

The one who knows recognizes that in the entire galaxy—and in fact, in the entire universe, with its billion, bazillion galaxies, with now we understand a bazillion planets out there, and who knows what kinds of life forms—there's never been anybody like you. Isn't that amazing? Life can say, "Okay, I'm going to make something new that I've never made before, and it's really weird, and let's see what happens with it." And it's you.

So you can't imitate it. You can be inspired, and I'm certainly inspired by models and teachers and people that mean a lot to me, that I resonate with, that I learn from. But I remember—because I'm in the spiritual industry, right, so I get to hang out with swamis and mamas and lamas and gurus and masters and whatever. They're not always quite how they're advertised, but anyway... that's another issue. We'll do that another night.

What is true is that I find myself at these conferences, and there's Eckhart Tolle and Ram Dass and Adyashanti and Ammachi and all these different lamas and the Dalai Lama. And I could look and say, "Gosh, am I anywhere near as enlightened as these people? How do we compare? Could I be like that person?" Useless. I could never be the Dalai Lama or Eckhart Tolle or Ammachi. Bless them all. And I don't think I'd want to be.

If you ever saw it, there's a wonderful movie about the life of Wavy Gravy called *Saint Misbehavin'*—it's about all the great stuff he's done. And at one point, toward the end of the film, he's sitting in front of his altar in the morning, meditating, and then he bows, and he makes a kind of prayer. He says, "Dear Goddess"—whoever he prays to—"I pray that I may be the best Wavy Gravy that there is." There's something really touching about it, because he's not trying to be anybody else. And however weird you are, he's matched you and doubled it, so it's okay.

This is from my dear friend Ed Brown, who is the author of *The Tassajara Bread Book* and *Cookbook*, and one of the Zen masters at San Francisco Zen Center over the years:

"When I first started cooking at Tassajara, I had a problem. I couldn't get my biscuits to come out the way they were supposed to. I'd follow the recipe, try variations, but nothing worked. The biscuits just didn't measure up. Growing up, I'd made two kinds of biscuits. One was from Bisquick and the other from Pillsbury. For the Bisquick, you add milk to the mix, then blob the dough in spoonfuls on the pan. You didn't even need to roll them out. The biscuits from Pillsbury came in a kind of cardboard can. If you whack it on the corner of the counter, it pops open, you twist the can, and put the premade biscuits on a pan and bake them. I really liked those Pillsbury biscuits. Isn't that what biscuits should taste like? Mine were not coming out right."

It's wonderful and amazing, the ideas of how we think life should be.

"People who ate my biscuits would extol their virtues, but to me, these perfectly good biscuits just weren't right. Finally, one day after meditating, came a revelation: Not right compared to what? Oh my word—I've been trying to make canned Pillsbury biscuits! Then came the moment of actually tasting my own biscuits without comparing them to some previous idea. They were wheaty, flaky, buttery, sunny, earthy, real—all those Zen things. These occasions are so stunning: the moments when you realize your life is as it is supposed to be, only you've been comparing it to something that's beautifully packaged in this culture. The cover of the magazine. The advertisement. But trying to produce a biscuit—or a life—with no dirty bowls, no messy feelings, no depression and anger, was so frustrating."

Then savoring and actually tasting the present moment of experience—how much more complex and multifaceted, how unfathomable. You understand the story. Spiritual life trying to make Pillsbury biscuits? Good luck. You are unique.

A couple more stories and we'll end. Lots of stories tonight. I kind of think of things as saying, "Now what would be a good poem or story for that?" I haven't told this story in ages, and it's actually one that's meant a lot to me.

In Africa—and I talked about this with my friend Malidoma, who comes from the Dagara people of West Africa—in certain groups, certain people, he lives among the Dagara people but others as well, before a woman has a child she has to learn the song of that child. Part of her task before she becomes pregnant is to find some beautiful tree out somewhere in the land, go sit under that tree, get really quiet, and envision or sense the spirit of the child that wants to come and be born with her—that little boy or that

little girl. Once she has a sense of that spirit wanting to be born, she has to ask it what its song is. And to learn the song of that child and sing it under that tree until she knows it by heart.

Then she goes back and teaches it to her lover. And when they make love, they sing the song together to invite that child to come in. She sings it to the baby as it grows in the womb. The midwives and women who gather when it's time for birth sing the song to the child when it first arrives—it's the first thing this child hears, the group of people around singing this baby's song.

Then it's taught to the village, and everybody knows each other's songs. So if the kid falls down and skins his knee or her knee, or cries or something, someone will pick them up and sing their song to them. It's sung in the rituals as they grow—you know, teenagers. The two songs of people are sung in a marriage ceremony so that they're brought together. And it's kept alive in the village until the very end, when somebody is old and ready to die. The last thing they do is gather around that person and sing that song to them.

When I heard this story, I thought, I want to live there. What would it be like to live in a culture where people know your song, know your uniqueness, know what's special about you—which there is in each one of us?

This is part of the one who knows: that which recognizes in the vastness there is also a uniqueness that is precious, and treasures it and values it and tends it in yourself, and tends and values and treasures that in others.

And then the last dimension—so many stories not told, but that's another night—is the one who knows understands how it works in this mystery: that you plant seeds and they bear fruit. That it's not random. What you practice becomes how things are.

The mind and the heart, the nervous system, the patterns of our relations, the patterns of society, the ecological patterns of the earth—these are ones that grow from repetition. It's part of how things work. If you want to learn meditation and really be able to live from the great heart of compassion and the one who knows, you have to practice. I mean, you practice guitar, right? Or you practice tennis or something. How about heart practice? You have to practice. Repetition is one of the keys. And depending what seeds you plant and what seeds you water, that's the pattern that will unfold.

Henry David Thoreau says, "I do not believe a plant will spring up where there has been no seed, but convince me you have a seed there and I am prepared to expect wonders."

The seeds can be seeds of kindness, of steadiness, of understanding, of self-respect, of courage, of standing up for what you care about, of speaking the truth, of seeing what's true, of loving another—which takes a lot of courage. There's a lot of things that ask for our courage, especially at this time.

It takes courage to plant the right seeds, and a consciousness. Yet something in the heart knows what seeds need to be planted and watered. We really do know this. And it's not a matter of time. You don't always get to see the results, but you get to focus on the best of your intention, on the value, the truth of what you speak, the rightness of what you do.

You set the heart's intention.

So the last story I'll tell, of so many, is of my friend Ari Ratana. Ari Ratana is now in his late eighties, and he's the most celebrated community organizer in Asia. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize at different times and won all these other prizes and so forth.

He was a high school teacher in a fancy prep school in the capital, Colombo, in Sri Lanka, as a young man—very much interested in social justice, very much interested in economic injustice, very much interested in the caste and racism that was happening there, trying to undo all the crazy things that human beings do with one another, seeing each other as if we're actually different.

So what he did was take his high school students, who were the sons of generals and ministers and wealthy business people, out to the poorest village areas. But he did something interesting. They were going to help in the school a little bit, yes—but he didn't bring them out there to help. He brought them out there so the villagers could teach them some things. They taught them how to use a machete, how to harvest certain kinds of fruits and crops. They taught them various arts they knew in the village, and then they served this magnificent banquet to these kids.

That was also a great kind of reversal, right? The upper-class kids—they weren't exactly white, but it was like that—were coming from the upper class and going to help the poor people. And in fact, he flipped it. Because the measure of courage and understanding and wisdom and collective that's there out in the earth and in the people who live with difficulty is what we need in this culture.

We just did a retreat up in the Upper Retreat Center—Trudy, my beloved wife, and I—a four-day retreat, which happened to coincide with four days of no electricity. So here's one hundred people. We had a generator, so there was hot food in the dining room. But other than that, it was dark, and it was cold. It got down to forty-two degrees

a couple of those nights. I was really cold—I could have done without that. But anyway, everybody was wrapped in blankets and had their little flashlight things. They were cool. They rose to it. They said, "All right, we're here." I said, "This is like the old days, remember? This is how it was done for thousands of years." And it was quite a fantastic retreat. Somehow, when the power came on the last night, there was a kind of "yes, we'll get warm," but there was also a disappointment—because we'd been through something.

So Ari took these young people out to learn in this way in the village. And he started something called Sarvodaya, which is the movement of the heart where people connect one heart to another to realize that we're all supporting one another on this beautiful earth. And it began to spread. As it did, they had different projects—digging wells, building schools, collaborating between villages and different parts of society.

And Ari explained: as it spread, it reached one half of the villages in the entire country over a period of twelve years. It just grew and grew and grew because it was based on love. And he said, "We're actually not building roads and digging wells and building schools. We're actually finding those to be vehicles so people can care for one another and so people can learn to love. That's really the goal."

Sri Lanka had a terrible civil war for quite a long time between different parts of the country. The Norwegians were trying to broker a peace treaty. And in the middle of that peace treaty making, Ari called all of his followers together to the great and ancient temple at Anuradhapura, the biggest old temple in Sri Lanka. And 650,000 people showed up. This in a country that only has eighteen million people.

And he stood up there and he said, "The Buddhist teachings say that one should not look at the results if one is wise, but one should look at the causes and conditions. And knowing the causes and conditions, one can then plant seeds to create other causes and conditions."

"So when I look," he said, "at our civil war, I see that it's taken five hundred years for us to get into this difficulty. Five hundred years of conflict between the Muslims and the Hindus and the Buddhists, four hundred years of colonial oppression, two hundred years of economic disparity between the wet, rich parts and the dry, poor parts."

"And so what I would like to offer you is the Sarvodaya Five Hundred Year Peace Plan. It took us five hundred years to get into this, and it will take us five hundred years to undo it."

Five years of ceasefire. Ten years of rebuilding roads and bridges and schools. Twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religious practices. Fifty to a hundred years of building an economic system that includes everyone. And after the first hundred years, we'll have a council to see how we're doing and what we need to focus on. And then we'll do it again four more times. And I believe at the end, Sri Lanka will be the nation that it could be.

When I heard this, I could have wept. I actually got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, who was kind of teared up about it as well. He knows Ari, but it speaks to his dilemma in Tibet. And the reason it was so moving was that it was the voice of an elder. It wasn't somebody who was worried about a focus group or the next election cycle or how long it would take. How long? As long as it takes.

Remember Dr. King again saying, "The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice." That's the phrase.

So this is about planting seeds, and it's actually revolutionary. It's a rebellion and it's a revolution because you don't turn back. You say, this is the heart's intention. This is what I know to be true in this life. This is what's possible. And I will be one of the ones that plants the seeds and waters and nurtures them—in myself, in the community around me, in the things that I care about.

So you meditate to quiet your mind, to tend your body and heart, to be able to hold it all—this remarkable, mysterious, painful, pleasurable human life—with great compassion and presence. And to find a kind of freedom of spirit, where who you are is not limited by praise and blame and gain and loss. You become the loving witness of it all. You become the one who knows, that awareness that is both timeless and also engaged from the heart of wisdom.

And the Buddha says, if it were not possible to liberate the heart, to be free in all the circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible for you to live with a free and liberated heart, so I offer these teachings.

So let's sit for a moment.

And as you go through your days, remember to pause. Take moments to become the witness, to rest in loving awareness, to be the one who knows—that vast and spacious openness. That's who you really are. As you go through your days, take a pause, and opening to vastness, then listen to your heart. It knows what matters.

CHAPTER 89

Loving the World | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 45 min

> *In this heartfelt talk delivered near the winter solstice, Jack Kornfield weaves together stories of Ram Dass, Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries, and touching everyday encounters to illuminate how we can meet difficult times with an open heart. Drawing on the metaphor of imaginal cells—those remarkable cells within a caterpillar's chrysalis that organize transformation into a butterfly—Kornfield invites us to recognize our own Buddha nature and capacity for awakening.*
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> *The talk explores the practice of seeing with 'the eyes of love,' referencing Thomas Merton's mystical experience on a Louisville street corner where he perceived the divine shining through every person he encountered. Through a deeply moving story of a Christmas Day encounter between a baby and a homeless man, Kornfield demonstrates how our judgments can blind us to the sacred humanity in each being. He shares how Father Greg Boyle's work with gang members embodies this teaching—taking those society has cast out and recognizing their inherent dignity and beauty.*
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> *Kornfield offers practical wisdom for navigating dark times both personal and collective: to be unafraid to be happy, unafraid to love, and unafraid to make a difference. Quoting Gandhi, Hafez, and Wendell Berry, he encourages listeners to 'plant sequoias'—engaging in meaningful work without attachment to seeing results. The teaching emphasizes forgiveness of the past, openness to mystery, and the importance of community in sustaining compassionate action. This is an invitation to tend the heart beautifully and recognize that both saving the world and savoring it are essential aspects of awakened living.*

So this evening we'll have some teachings, as is often the case. Occasionally there's dialogue or Q&A, and then there's a slideshow—short, not so many minutes. Then we'll do a bit of a ritual as we come closer to the winter solstice, because it is a time that people all around the world, at least in the Northern hemisphere, quiet themselves as we get closer to the darkest day of the year.

There are all the different kinds of holiday celebrations that go back to ancient times, fostered in all the different cultural and spiritual and religious traditions. Most of them have to do with light—lighting candles and fires, in some way trying to bring light. It's sort of superstitious and inaccurate to think that it's light to bring the light back. What it really is, is an acknowledgement that we carry an inner light as well as the outer light, and that we can trust that light in ourselves and others, and that the light will return.

This becomes really important in these times, because they're tough times outwardly. We all have our personal dilemmas, but it's also visible—the growing divisiveness in the world, the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, the growing fear-based tribalism, nationalism, racism, climate change, the lack of protection for women in many ways in the world, the cultural anxiety that we all live in. This is part of what we carry in our hearts.

One of the things that's grown out of Spirit Rock is all kinds of interesting projects and beautiful things that people are doing—people who get quiet here and quiet their minds and tend their hearts and then go out and express that stillness through caring for the world. We've got the Insight Prison Project and the Insight Out Prison Project, different prison projects that I've been involved with over time, along with others from Spirit Rock.

Dear friends who work in the prisons share stories like this: more than two-thirds of incarcerated women are in prison for non-violent, low-level drug crimes or property crimes. One person doing prison work said that one of the incarcerated women she was working with was a young Black mother serving a long prison sentence for writing checks to buy her three young children Christmas gifts without sufficient funds in her account. She seemed like a character out of a Victor Hugo novel. She cheerfully explained the tale, and this person couldn't really accept the truth of it until she checked the file and discovered that she had in fact been convicted and sentenced to over ten years in prison for writing five checks, including three to Toys R Us. None of them was for more than $150.

We carry this. We know about the horrors of the prison system in our country, the largest in the world. We know about these things, and they're not just tough for us to know about—we carry them together with our own personal struggles. This is our human life. We read about or hear about the news of people on the border, refugee camps on our own border. We don't have to talk about the Rohingya or the refugees pouring out of Syria or the Uyghurs. It's here in the U.S., and homelessness too.

I'm naming all these things because they're part of the tough times that we have, and they touch our hearts. It's not like we know this and completely turn away. There's something in us that cares, and it makes it harder to hold it.

So how do we get through this? How do we get through times where the light seems to disappear, as it does in the turning of the seasons and the earth around the sun toward our winter solstice—but also through outwardly tough times, times of darkness?

The Buddhist texts begin with a phrase: "Oh nobly born, oh you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are." This is an invitation to remember your own Buddha nature or true nature, your original goodness.

Scientists who study butterflies and caterpillars know that a caterpillar will go into a cocoon, undergo some change, and come out with wings to fly away—which is already kind of astonishing. But what most people don't realize is that they don't go in there as a caterpillar and then sprout and grow wings. They actually dissolve themselves, so that if you were to open the cocoon at a certain stage, it's a mass of liquid cells and there's no caterpillar anymore. There's just all the cells that made up that animal.

And then there's a specific type of cell in that chrysalis that scientists have named imaginal cells. I just love it—because imaginal cells are the ones that think they can fly. They're the first cells that organize all those other cells into a new and different organism, so that when it's time, it will come out of that chrysalis as a moth or a butterfly and fly away.

In a way, this is what our Buddha nature or true nature is about. We have in our own hearts that kind of imaginal cells. We each have a capacity for awakening, for dignity, for freedom, for greater compassion—to gaze upon this troubled and unbearably beautiful world with the great heart of compassion, with the eyes of compassion and wonder and the eyes of wisdom, to see it from the heart of understanding.

Because here you are, born into this human realm, into a human incarnation. It's kind of wild. Nobody gave you the manual when you came in, right?

And it's like, well, how do I do this as a human being? How do I live beautifully as a human being in this mystery?

I just came back from traveling, and was helping with my beloved Trudy. She and I were together in Hawaii helping teach a retreat with Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*. Ram Dass is now eighty-eight years old, and he's kind of frail. He's been in a wheelchair for twenty years, and he can't speak very many words this year—he's sort of losing his verbal capacity. But he was there. And Krishna Das would sing beautiful kirtan in the evening, and we would teach and do meditation, Trudy and I and others.

And then we'd also hear from people in the group. There was everything—people's gratitude and triumph: "We've done this, I've practiced, I've found my way." There was somebody who came up and talked to me about having two-year-old triplets. I said, "My God, how did you get away to even come to this retreat?" All the beautiful things. And then people also stood up and talked about loss—about a child who died, or someone in

the middle of struggling with cancer. And in many cases, they talked about how nourishing it was to be on this retreat and come together to chant and sing and meditate and be in the field of love and practice.

At the end of the retreat—which I've been teaching now for a number of years with Ram Dass, Trudy and I have—he does a blessing ceremony in which everyone is given a little wrist mala, a little set of beads, and tied into it is one thread from his guru's blanket, from Neem Karoli Baba.

Now, when I was joking around at the beginning about gurus and lamas and swamis and mamas, I didn't mean to say that there aren't many wonderful gurus, because there are. You have to use your discriminating wisdom to sort them, because they're like anything—there's all kinds of gurus. But Ram Dass's guru was a really remarkable, amazing figure.

My favorite story, which he tells most every year but this year couldn't speak as much, is that he had been training and doing his yoga and meditation and learning all the inner practices and devotional practices with his guru. And he was happy just to be living in India. But then his guru said, "No, you have to go back to America and teach." And he didn't want to do that. He wanted to stay in this wonderful place where he was filled with love. His guru said, "No, you have to go back." And Ram Dass said, "You know, I feel unready. I feel I'm not cooked. I feel insecure. I feel impure in some ways. I want to become more pure."

And his guru got up off the little seat where he was resting and stood up. He looked really closely at Ram Dass from top to bottom, then walked around and looked at his side, then looked at him from the back. He spent a few minutes gazing at him, looking at every part of him. Then he sat back down and quieted himself and looked Ram Dass in the eye and said, "I see no imperfections."

Ram Dass said that was a moment that really changed his life. It's sometimes called the gaze of wonder, or the gaze of love, that can change everything.

So here's Ram Dass at the end of the retreat, and he couldn't speak much. He was sitting there, and others close to him blessed these malas. Then in front of him, someone would put one in each person's hand while we were all chanting. It took a while—an hour, an hour and a half with some hundreds of people. And he would just look at people with so much love. I had a front row seat there.

I remembered reading about Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic. There is in Louisville, Kentucky, at the intersection of Fourth Street and Walnut, probably the only historical monument and plaque to a mystical experience that I know of in the United

States. Merton wrote about it. He said, "I came out of the monastery where we were trying to do holy practices, to go shopping or whatever, and I was walking down Fourth Street. And all of a sudden I could see this secret beauty in the eyes of everyone that I passed." He said, "If we could see each other this way, there'd be no more war or hatred or greed. The big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other." He said, "There I was trying to be holy in the monastery, and the divine—whatever you want to call it—was shining out of the eyes of absolutely everybody I passed."

I love that story. I've told it many times. Sitting there with Ram Dass and watching these people file by—everybody, the woman with the triplets and the person with cancer—all gazing into his eyes, so many people with tears. There was such beauty in it, because he just radiates love. That's all. He said, "I just love everything. I love everybody. I love everything without exception."

And you could feel it.

And it's been with me a lot as I drive or walk around, because I notice that I see people and I can say, all right, this person is a friend, I like them. Or this person I don't know very well—somebody new. But then I can change the lens, and I wonder who they really are, how their life is. What if they were more than a friend? What if this was my sister or my brother? How would I feel? What if they were my lover or my partner? What if they were my daughter or my son?

And all of a sudden, as I look and see that person and what they carry—because we all carry our measure of tears and our struggles—but we also carry such beauty behind it. The fact that we're still here and surviving. You can start to see, you can play with awareness itself. With the lens of the heart, you can start to see the beauty in everybody. It's just a different way of walking down the street, or working with people.

And so I was moved and inspired. I wept a little bit and was touched, and mostly just reminded that this is what matters. We don't do it all the time—I don't do it all the time either. I do my practices and try to remember.

The Sufis put it this way. They say, "Overcome any bitterness because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you." Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, we are each endowed with a certain measure of that cosmic pain. You are called upon to meet it in compassion instead of self-pity. You're part of the mother of the world.

And so you see each person, and they all have their troubles and they all have their beauty. When the heart is open, you can say, "Oh yes, this is my daughter, this is my son, this is the closest being in the world to me." And it changes things. But we're afraid somehow inside ourselves that our heart isn't big enough, that we'd get overwhelmed, that it's too much.

Two days ago I was in Los Angeles, and Insight LA—which is the Los Angeles sister center to Spirit Rock, run by my wife Trudy, my beloved—a series of different centers in LA, we had our annual benefit. There were a number of wonderful speakers who came, people who do incredible work in the world. And the pièce de résistance of the benefit was Father Greg Boyle, who started Homeboy Industries. He's a Catholic priest.

For any of you who don't know his book called *Tattoos on the Heart*, which is in the bookstore—it's one of the most moving books that I've read in years and years. He's a really remarkable person. He was talking about his ministry, because what Homeboy Industries has done now for twenty years or more is take gang kids in and care for them. They teach them how to get a job, how to live in the world, how to support themselves. They have all kinds of industries, contracts with the city. They have cafés—Homegirl Café. There's one in the airport, actually.

But he gets these guys and gals who have been on the streets, who have been part of gangs. And partly they're part of gangs because they need a family. They need an initiation. There's nobody to care for them or initiate them. If you were among the Maasai people and you were a young man, they'd say, "Go and hunt a lion and come back, and now we'll see you as a worthy man in our community." There are the same kinds of initiations for young women. But we don't have that for our young people. So they're trying to prove themselves. And they do it in a kind of undeclared war on the streets—lots of violence, lots of shooting, lots of rivalry.

And in the middle of it is Father Greg. He knows them all. He's baptized a lot of them. He does rituals for them, for many of them. And as he said sadly, he also buries some of them.

He said, "My work is to take the people who've been disposed of by this culture, who've been denigrated and dispossessed and thrown out—not only on the streets, but really thrown out of people's hearts. And I bring them in and I see their beauty and I make a real relationship with them." They love him, and he's funny and he's wise.

He was telling stories—he's full of amazing stories. He said, "So I had these two homies come in to work. After a while, to get them ready, I put them to work in our bakery." These guys were from rival gangs that had been shooting at each other.

And that was the kind of stories that he told. And you could feel his humility and his calling and his care and his bravery. To see those who we cast out in some way in our culture and our time, and see them with the eyes that Thomas Merton described, or Ram Dass—the secret beauty.

So I've been reading or telling stories this year, longer stories in the classes that I've done. And there's a story I want to read tonight. I have to apologize because it's a story I've used a couple of times in the last twenty years, so some of you will have heard it. But you have to just think about it.

It's like when I hang out with my grandson Desmond, who just turned one year old and is—just this last week—able to walk himself. He's sort of like drunk, you know, like one of those little drunk people, but he can do it. And half the time his hands are up like he's triumphant: "I've done it! I can move myself!" But he has a lot of books, and he likes to have his books read. And it's not like he hears the book and then wants a new one. He wants to hear the story again. "Would you read that one again?" So keep that little beginner's mind here.

It was Sunday, Christmas. Our family spent the holidays in the Bay Area, but in order to be back for work Monday, we had to drive the four hundred miles back to L.A. on Christmas Day. Normally an eight-hour drive, but with kids it can be a fourteen-hour endurance test. When we could stand it no longer, we stopped for lunch in King City—a little metropolis of six gas stations and three diners.

Road weary, saddle sore, I sat Eric, our one-and-a-half-year-old, in a high chair and looked around and thought, "What am I doing in this place on Christmas Day?" It was nearly empty. We were the only family.

My reverie was interrupted when I heard Eric squeal with delight and glee. "Hi there!"—two words he thought were one word. "Hi there! Hi there!" He pounded his fat baby hands, whack-whack, on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and chirped.

And then I saw the source of his merriment, and my eyes couldn't take it in all at once. A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else long ago. Dirty, greasy, worn. Baggy pants, zipper half-mast over a spindly body. Toes that poked out of old shoes. A face like none other—gums as bare as Eric's, whiskers too short to be called a beard, and a nose so varicose it looked like the map of New York. I was too far away to smell him, but I knew he smelled. And his hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists. "Hi there, baby! Hi there, big boy! I see you, buster!"

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between "What do we do?" and "Poor devil."

Eric continued to laugh and answer, "Hi there! Hi there!" Every call was echoed. I noticed waitresses' eyebrows shoot to their foreheads, and several people were groaning out loud. This old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby.

I shoved a cracker at Eric, and he pulverized it on the tray. I began to get upset. Our meal came. The cacophony continued. Now the old bum was shouting from across the room, "Do you know pat-a-cake?"

Do you know peek-a-boo? Peek-a-boo! Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo! Really loud. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was drunk and a disturbance, and I was embarrassed. My husband was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, "Why is that old man shouting and talking so loud?"

We ate in silence—all except Eric, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring applause of a skid row bum.

Finally, I had enough. I turned the high chair. Eric screamed and clambered around to face his buddy. Now I was mad. Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Eric and meet him in the parking lot.

I trundled Eric out of the high chair and looked toward the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door. *Lord, let me out of here*, I thought, *before he speaks to us*.

It soon became obvious that the Lord and Eric had other plans.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him. And as I did so, Eric—all the while with his eyes riveted to his new best friend—leaned far over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's pick-me-up position. In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye to eye with the old man. Eric was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes both asked and implored: *Would you let me hold your baby?*

There was no need or way for me to answer, since Eric propelled himself from my arms into the man's. Suddenly, a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Eric laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed. I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. Aged hands, full of grime and pain and labor, so gently cradled my baby's bottom and back.

I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Eric in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened. He said in a commanding voice, looking directly at me, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow I managed, "I will, I will," from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Eric from his chest—unwillingly, longingly—as though he was in pain. "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift."

I said nothing more than a muttered thanks. With Eric back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Eric so tightly, and why I was saying, "How could I have forgotten? How could I have forgotten?"

This is really Father Greg's work—to see each person that comes through the door in that way, to see the humanity of every person. And now, in the time of solstice, the fertile darkness, we're called upon to see with different eyes. Maybe to see with the heart, if you will.

Helen Keller said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." In these times, we can feel like despairing, worried that it won't work out. The poet Deena Metzger writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again." This is what we do as human beings—we start again.

Or Gandhi, who says, "When I despair"—and that's an amazing line to hear from Mahatma Gandhi. When *I* despair. So it's not just you, right? "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always."

So it's collective. But it's also very personal for each one of us. For me, being with Ram Dass and being with Father Greg—these saintly people—I think, "Well, am I supposed to be like them?" Still my ego at work. *Okay, I could be like them.* No way.

I can't be them. I can only be me.

I remember seeing the documentary *Saint Misbehaving*, a beautiful film made about Wavy Gravy. At one point, the film shows Wavy Gravy—who has done all this extraordinary service work, working with kids in hospitals and burn units through his clown ministry, or working in India for the Seva Foundation, which has now completed its five millionth eye surgery to restore sight to five million blind people. Incredible

work. And there's Wavy Gravy, who is this sort of wondrous and ridiculous character—really, he is—and I love him. He's got his altar, and the film shows him making his morning prayer. His prayer is something like: "Dear God, please make me the best Wavy Gravy you can." It's sincere. And it's also wacky. But it's just right.

I can sense in myself that I'm not going to be those sages and saintly people. But I can be more present. I can be more attentive. I can be more loving. I can remember more often. I can see with the eyes of love. And we all have this possibility.

We're all both very fortunate and unfortunate. That's how it is, being a human being. But in the middle of that, we each have the possibility for greater compassion, greater love, greater presence, greater wakefulness, greater freedom in ourselves.

Hafez, the poet, says: "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions."

What this means is to be unafraid to be happy. How's that? Because Father Greg is happy, Ram Dass is happy, the Dalai Lama is happy. Now I just named a bunch of guys. I could name some very wonderful women who are also happy—saints and sages of all kinds. I think of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, who received the Nobel Prize. They said, "Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers, and now it's known for its women leaders." The suffering isn't the end of the story; it's actually possible to turn it around.

To be unafraid to be happy. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote: "Now and then it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy." This is it. This is your life. It's actually possible to be unafraid to be happy, to be unafraid to love.

If fear is the cheapest room in the house—I remember this Feiffer cartoon. There's a woman on her knees with her arms outstretched, saying, "I love you." And there's a guy standing there with his arms crossed, and the little bubble of response is: "Don't you threaten me." Oh, Feiffer is so good.

To be unafraid to be happy. To be unafraid to love. And to be unafraid to make a difference. Because you are making a difference by the way you live, by what you say, by how you see the world, by how you drive and shop and vote—all the things that make you a citizen, how you move through this world.

To be unafraid to make a difference, to plant your seeds, which are beautiful when you own them. Your own Buddha nature. There is more love, more compassion, more capacity to care for yourself as well as others, because that's the circle of compassion. Is this compassionate for them, and is it compassionate for this one here? They have to come together.

And then you join in. You join in—whether it's working for climate transformation, getting out the vote, the community garden, writing poems that transform people's consciousness, teaching refugees to read, working in the schools, or building a conscious business. Join in something that matters, where when you go to sleep, you feel like, "All right, I'm also doing something very deliberate, joining the others who make a difference." Because this really has to be done partly by you, but it also has to be done in community.

Some years ago, on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Seattle, a young Catholic priest stopped to talk to a parishioner and her five-year-old daughter, Carmen. The little girl had a new jump rope, and the priest, being young, began to demonstrate the intricacies of rope jumping from his own childhood. Delighted, little Carmen began to jump—first once, then twice. The mother and priest clapped loudly for her skill. Eventually, the little girl was able to jump quite well on her own and wandered off with her newfound ability. Priest and mother chatted a few moments until Carmen, with sadder, wiser eyes, returned, dragging her rope.

"Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."

So you have these things to plant, to change, whether it's the vote or the climate or the refugees or whatever it happens to be. But we also need each other in it.

E.B. White said, "I wake up in the morning not knowing whether to save the world or savor it." This dilemma. Of course, the answer to all these kind of Zen koans is yes. The answer is yes—to save and to savor. And so you join others in this.

Mr. Rogers' mother was the one who told him that when things are really difficult and there's some catastrophe or natural disaster or a big problem, don't focus on the problem, on the fire, on the hurricane. Look for the helpers. Look for the thousand people from Alabama and Georgia and various places who came with their boats. The armada—I think it was called the Cajun Navy—from Louisiana that went to Houston to take dogs off roofs and pick up mothers and their children. So you align yourself with those who care.

And you plant your seeds, and it doesn't matter how long it takes. Poet Wendell Berry says, "Plant sequoias." They take two thousand years. That way you get out of the head of thinking you're going to see the result. And you have the joy of planting the seeds for the long term. It's so mysterious.

Don't be afraid to start anew. This is the perfect time. Not just New Year's resolutions, by the way. I got a request—I forget which magazine it was, it might have been Cosmo, one of those checkout stand women's magazines that we know—and they asked me to do an article for New Year's on lasting change. How the New Year's resolutions go out the door after about a week or two. And I said, "Lasting change? You're asking a Buddhist to do lasting change? I think you've got the wrong person here." Things change, you know.

But the beautiful thing about things change is you can start anew. With this solstice and with the darkness—it's called fertile darkness—the things that really matter in your heart can come more into the light. So start anew. Let yourself forgive the past, however it was.

There's this line of poetry from a Zen poet: "My old faults like snow falling on warm ground." Isn't that tender? My old faults like snow falling on warm ground.

There's a way in which we can look at our past judgmentally. We all have done all kinds of things—good and not so good, and then worse than that. But here's William Butler Yeats: "I'm content to follow to its source every event in action and thought his whole life. Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot. When such as I cast out remorse, so great a sweetness flows into my breast, for we must laugh and we must sing, for we are blessed by everything and everything we look upon is blessed."

So you forgive the past—it's done, it's gone. You start anew and you open yourself to mystery. Because it really is mysterious. Nobody knows how we got here. Really. Not to speak of where we're going. Nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow. Somebody tell me for sure—raise your hand, I'll invest. But we don't know. Is it going to go up or down?

What is going to happen? It's so mysterious.

So instead, the invitation into this mystery is to keep your heart open and tend it beautifully.

This from Rachel Carson, the great naturalist. She says, "If I had influence with the good fairy who's supposed to preside over the birth of all children, I would ask that her gift to each child in the world would be a sense of wonder so indestructible it would last throughout life."

Or as Mary Oliver put it in her famous line, "I was a bride married to amazement."

And the fact that we're here, that we speak and listen and communicate and come together and come apart and that we're part of this turning world circling our star—what a wonder.

CHAPTER 90

Meditation: Loving the World | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 23 min

> *In this heartfelt evening session, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a loving-kindness (mettā) meditation while contemplating the iconic Earthrise image. Beginning with well-wishes for loved ones, the practice expands to embrace all beings—human and non-human—recognizing our fundamental interconnection. Kornfield draws on Chief Seattle's wisdom about our relationship with all creatures and references the classical mettā teachings that encourage spreading compassion "to beings everywhere in all forms, omitting none."*
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> *The talk then guides participants through the creation of blessing cords (also called protection cords), an ancient ritual found across Asian Buddhist traditions. Kornfield explains that these red threads symbolize our being woven together in the mystery of life, and also represent a thread from monastic robes—a reminder that we carry our practice into the marketplace. Three knots are tied: one for refuge and connection to the sacred, one for the commitment to compassion and non-harming, and one for a personal vow or intention.*
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> *Kornfield invites practitioners to formulate their own bodhisattva-like vow, sharing Diane Ackerman's poem as inspiration: "I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace." The session closes with the chanting of "Namo" (to honor, to bow) as participants exchange blessing cords and silent blessings with one another—a beautiful integration of mettā practice, intention-setting, and communal connection.*

I'd like us to do a little loving kindness practice before we do the blessing cords.

As you gaze at the image of this earth—earth rise—and all the beings on it: the ones who are suffering, the ones who are happy, the ones who are causing happiness, the ones who are causing suffering. And they change around. They're not always the same, you know. And the animals and plants, the life that makes up this earth. All of what Chief Seattle calls the beasts. He says what happens to the beasts happens to humankind.

Begin to do the practice of loving kindness, which is to open your heart. First, as you see this globe, think of the people you love the most, living their lives on this mysterious earth. And wish them well. May they be safe and protected. May they be healed and well in body and mind. May they be filled with the tenderness of compassion and loving kindness. May they live with a loving heart. May they be happy.

Feel your well-wishing for those you love, those you're close to, moving around on this mysterious earth.

Then realize that all the others—all the other humans and all the animals, the non-humans—they all have mothers, fathers. Most have sisters and brothers. They have their struggles and their hopes and their wishes. They're actually part of your family. Needless to say, some parts of your family don't behave so well. That's part of family. But they're part of our family, all of them.

And wish, as you look at this beautiful globe: May you be free from hatred, all of you. May you be free from fear. May you remember the heart of compassion and kindness, whoever you are. May you plant seeds of goodness and happiness.

The phrase in the text on loving kindness says: spreading the spirit of loving kindness and compassion to beings everywhere in all forms, omitting none—the great heart of compassion and kindness.

Here we are, floating through the vastness of space and time. "For we must laugh and we must sing," says Yeats, "for we are blessed by everything, and everything we look upon is blessed." Send your good wishes and your blessings to beings in every form.

The last thing of the evening is this, again quite optional. I'd like us to make or create what are called blessing cords. Sometimes they're called protection cords. Somebody asked this great lama, "What do they protect you from?" He said, "Why, yourself, of course"—the main protection that we need as human beings.

But in order to make them, first you have to set an intention. Sometimes it's called a vow in Buddhist practice. In Zen you might sit and say, "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all." I've talked about this often here. The problem being that when you get home, the people you live with don't want to be saved by you, right? So it has to have some other meaning than that.

And the meaning really is that you set the compass of your heart for each situation and each circumstance.

The vow in Diane Ackerman's poem: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon, and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

I read this to one of the great lamas that teaches together with the Dalai Lama. He said, "Oh, where did you get that Bodhisattva vow? I want that." It's nice to see it all going back and forth across traditions.

So in order to create these blessing cords, I'd like you to close your eyes for a moment. Very simply, in the quiet, in the darkness of this time of year, you get to listen to the light within, to your heart. And if you were to make a vow or set an intention—a long-term vow, an intention of the heart, a direction—what would yours be, this day in December? And it can be very simple.

I vow to be kind. I vow to see the beauty in every being I meet. What would yours be?

Now, letting your eyes open. Later on, I'd suggest that you write this down, or put it in your phone, or wherever you keep your treasures. But before you do that, the next step is something quiet that will take words. If you're comfortable or willing, turn toward a person next to you and listen to them—not a conversation, no commentary. Simply listen to them speak out loud the vow that they just made or the intention they set. And then speak yours. This is a conversation of the heart. It's a different kind of conversation than we usually have. Pay attention to what it's like.

How was that—to listen to somebody else's intention or vow? Was it okay? It's kind of not our usual conversation, is it? It's actually something special in a way, to hear and listen and be touched by another person.

As the red cords are being passed around, let me talk about them a little bit for those of you who are going to do this.

They're part of an ancient ritual that goes across most of Asia, where a thread—a cotton cord—is used in marriages and healing ceremonies and blessings and all kinds of rituals. It's considered to be the thread that symbolizes that we're woven together in this mystery, that we're living on that planet you see, woven in the field of life with all the rest of life. You breathe with it and you eat with it. It is you. This is who you are—you're woven with it.

Its particular color also signifies that it's one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun, so that you wear your robes into the marketplace. You're really a monk or a nun—a monk or a nun in drag, maybe, going into the marketplace—but this is your real garment. I have this one I got from the Dalai Lama. It's a reminder of that intention you made and of your true nature.

So to activate your blessing cord, we have to tie three knots in it.

The first knot is called the knot of refuge. It's really the knot of your connection to that which is holy or sacred. For some, in the Buddhist tradition, it's the Buddha, or Buddha and Dharma, the teachings of awakening. For others, there are a thousand names for that which is holy and that which is the source to which you turn, that which inspires and reminds you.

Hold your cord and reflect on the deepest connection to the sacred in whatever form that is—the refuge or support you have. And when you're ready, let yourself tie a knot in the center of the cord to remind you of this connection that you have to the vastness and to the sacred, in whatever form touches you.

The second knot is the knot of compassion. It starts simply by holding the cord and making the intention to not harm yourself and others as best you can—not to add to suffering. This is the basis of compassion. Yes, to alleviate suffering, but first not to add to it in your words, in your deeds, in your actions. To have a reverence for life and a care for one another. To not cause harm out of compassion, and to respond by caring for yourself and others.

This is the knot of the great heart of compassion: May I help alleviate suffering, and may I not cause harm to myself or others. Reflect in your own way on what that means to you. Then tie the second knot, which is the commitment to that heart of compassion and kindness.

The third knot is the knot of the intention or vow that you just made and spoke aloud. You set the compass of your heart in this direction. You set a deep and beautiful intention or vow. Remember it now, and tie the third knot in the cord to carry this.

Now your blessing protection cord is fully activated. If you wish to wear it—again, all optional—if you want it around your neck, as mine is, you can put it around the back of your neck and let the two ends hang down. If you want it around your wrist, wrap it two or three times and let the two ends hang down.

As our way of closing, I'd like us to do a very simple chant. In the greetings you find across much of India, people will put their hands together and say namaste. The root of the word namaste is in Sanskrit probably the word namo, which means to honor or bow to. I want us to chant namo for a time, and you can feel as we chant it, or sense, what you want to bow to. You can turn and inwardly bow to this beautiful blue pearl that's floating, to the people you love, to the things you care about, to the people who are in trouble, to their helpers—to whatever it is.

Namo

These aren't really teachings. They're reminders of something you already know. Whatever nourishment, whatever reminder touched you tonight in some way, something that you got or wear or carry—take it out into the world, sprinkle it around.

Have beautiful holidays. Thank you. Good night.

CHAPTER 91

Climate Change / Ram Dass | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 1h02

> *In this heartfelt Monday Night Talk from the beginning of 2020, Jack Kornfield weaves together reflections on the death of his dear friend and teacher Ram Dass with teachings on how to meet the climate crisis and other challenges of our times. Drawing from their decades of friendship and shared teaching, Kornfield shares intimate stories of Ram Dass's final days, his guru Neem Karoli Baba's simple instruction to "love people and feed them," and the transformative power of being seen with unconditional love.*
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> *Kornfield explores the Buddha's Fire Sermon, teaching that the world burns with greed, hatred, and delusion—the same forces driving today's climate crisis. He emphasizes that while we must tend to outer problems, we must equally transform our inner landscape, becoming what Ram Dass called "loving awareness." Stories from Father Greg Boyle's work with gang members at Homeboy Industries and Christina Figueres's journey to the Paris Climate Accord illustrate how shifting from blame to interconnection can create profound change.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for these difficult times: recognizing obstacles as inherent to meaningful work, choosing which seeds to water in our hearts, and maintaining wonder amid uncertainty. Kornfield recommends Paul Hawken's "Drawdown" as a resource for climate action, and closes with a mettā practice sending cooling love to those affected by the Australian bushfires—a reminder that our practice extends beyond the cushion into caring for all beings.*

So here we are in the temple. And again, hello to you who are on the live stream as well, at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties yet again—a new decade. We come together to get a little quiet, and with it we also contemplate this beautiful and troubled world and our place in it.

When we come to sit together to meditate, to quiet ourselves, sometimes it's for a little spiritual uplift or new perspective, or sometimes it's just to get in touch with our own bodies or our hearts. Sometimes it's to remember, as you sit quietly, that there's a bigger picture. You remember the famous Ojibwe saying: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

Our lives are really mysterious, and we actually don't know where they're going and what will happen. You have some ideas about it, but you can't be sure what's going to happen tomorrow. Really. For you or the people you love or the people around you.

So here we had a baby blessing, and I also want to talk about my dear friend Ram Dass, who died in December.

There's a woman named Margo Weiss who created what's called the Salt Monument. In Colorado, she had this beautiful wooden temple room built, and in the middle of it is a lucite transparent crystal suspended on its points that rotates every twenty-four hours in a circle. It's filled with 7.83 billion crystals of salt—one for each person on earth. In the morning, she adds a little cup of approximately 350,000 crystals of salt for all the people who will be born that day. And in the evening, she draws off a smaller cup of 200,000 crystals of salt for all the people who died that day. Each day, when she adds the new births and takes the deaths, she does this beautiful prayer and mantra and blessing for those coming in and those going out—which, by the way, are you at some point.

So here we are, kind of in the middle between the beginning and the end of this particular incarnation, in this beautiful troubled world. What do we know?

This poem I like from Juan Ramón Jiménez:

I am not I. I am this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk, the one who forgives sweet when I hate, the one who takes a walk when I am indoors, the one who will remain standing when I die.

It's a reminder that there's some part of you—you know this—that's bigger than your to-do list and your accomplishments and your plans and your personality and your emotions. There's something that's bigger than that, that can take a look and say, "Wow, we're kind of in the middle of this life, aren't we? How's this incarnation going for you?" And step back. Because who you are is not your body—tacos, Big Macs, kale—that's not your identity. You're not your emotions, because they come and go. I hope you're not your thoughts. That would be tragic.

So who are you? You're the spirit, the consciousness that was born into this body and will also leave it. You'll see at the end, and then she'll take out that little cup of salt, and you'll be one of those crystals.

My dear friend Ram Dass died in December. I was with him the week before he died, teaching a retreat. Trudy, my wife, my beloved, and I were teaching together with Ram Dass. Ram Dass was the Harvard professor and the LSD proponent with Tim Leary for a long time as Richard Alpert, and then became his spiritual teacher, a friend and a colleague and a mentor for me, and also the author of the best-selling book *Be Here Now*, which changed a lot of people's lives. So many people would come up to him when we would travel or be together and say, "Ram Dass, I just need to tell you—you changed my life."

Have read this and had some effect from *Be Here Now*? Yeah, maybe a third or so. It's in the bookstore if you're interested. And then there's another book there called *Walking Each Other Home*, which is a conversation about dying. Ram Dass was eighty-eight and in a wheelchair after a major stroke, really preparing to die. This is a beautiful, heartfelt conversation about preparing to die—Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush.

Be Here Now, which came out at the end of the 1960s—he wrote things like: "When we awaken, we watch the entire drama of our lives. We watch the illusions that we get caught in with unbearable compassion. For you are all form, you are the breath, you are the river, you are the void, you are the desires and fears and illusions, and you are the enlightenment that sees it all. When you understand, you realize I am beyond space and time, for I am nothing and everything, and everything is in me." When you see it all form an eternity as a miracle, then what's left? You chop wood and carry water—the famous Zen phrase. Once you've gotten enlightened, what else is there to do? You go back into the world and tend it in some fashion.

So he was quite ready to die. He suffered a lot in the wheelchair, and his body was frail and full of puncture wounds from tubes and shots and things like that. And he died very peacefully.

When we practiced together at the December retreat, there was a big picture of his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. Ram Dass once asked his guru, "How do I get enlightened?" And his guru answered, "Love people." He said, "No, no—how do I get enlightened?" And his guru said, "Feed people. Love people and feed them." That became a big part of his life.

His guru sent him back to teach in the U.S. Ram Dass said, "I'm not ready to do it." He'd been there doing yoga and meditation and austerities, learning all these things. And his guru said, "Now it's time for you to go teach." He said, "I'm not ready. I'm too uncooked. I'm too impure. You want somebody who's wiser, like you. I have too many imperfections to teach others."

So his guru got off that little wooden seat where he would be resting and very slowly, taking a couple of minutes, walked around Ram Dass—one side and his back and the other side—looking him up and down, looking at his hands and his feet. Then he sat down, looked at Ram Dass, and said, "I see no imperfections."

That was a moment that really changed Ram Dass's life—to be seen in that way. Because we have all these judgments about ourselves, how we look or sound. Here I am, quite sniffly tonight. I'm not actually sick; it's allergies. But all the things that we have, all the judgments that we carry—and the guru looks at you and says, "I see no imperfections. You're perfectly yourself. You're perfectly as you should be." How's that?

So then he came back and taught meditation and the liberation that was there in *Be Here Now*. But he also served the world, chopping wood and carrying water. He did hospice work. He started the Living Dying Project and all kinds of other hospice endeavors. He did prison work.

He said, "When I go into death row"—as he did at San Quentin—"when I go in the prisons, if they're short-timers, there for a year or five years, they don't want to meditate. They just want to get out somehow. But when I sit with the men on death row, oh, then we get real. Because they really want to look at: Who am I? What is this?" He said, "I love going into death row, because we have a conversation from the heart that really matters."

I think about this because Trudy, my beloved, runs a center in Los Angeles—InsightLA—that does all kinds of social action, dharma in action, compassion in action projects: homeless shelters, work with refugees, and so forth. One of the things they've done is work in children's hospitals, and they do retreats for the

staff who work in the NICU, the neonatal intensive care unit. They make retreats for the nurses, doctors, and other caregivers. They sit quietly, do practices of compassion, and form a circle where they can talk.

The thing is, if you do that kind of work, you can't really talk to other people about it. Because every week you have these babies that you're tending, these early preemies, and every week one or two of them die. You have to go talk to the parents and say, "I'm sorry, this beautiful child was born too early. This child didn't make it." You can't go home and say, "Oh yeah, another baby died." It doesn't work that way. You have to in some way hold it. But that's also a terrible thing to have to hold in your heart.

So like Ram Dass, they make a space where those who do this work can sit in the company of one another and tell the stories that weigh on their hearts and find a way to hold it—with ritual, with practice of compassion, and more than anything, in a community of those who hold it together.

This is what Ram Dass did. He worked in business, social ventures, bringing business leaders together to do it in a humane way. He started Seva Foundation with a number of other people. They said, "Well, what can we do that's of value in the world? There are a lot of blind people." So they started a project to restore sight using very simple cataract surgery, relatively inexpensive, starting primarily in India and Nepal and then spreading around the world. So far they've helped four and a half million people who were blind, who a day later walk out able to see.

So when his guru said "love people and feed them," he did it.

But he also had a field of great emptiness and detachment. I was there when a colleague of mine who had a whole spiritual community was going through a hard time with their director and other teachers. You think spiritual communities are nice places, right? And they are, except for one small problem: people. So this person was wrestling with how to straighten things out. "This person acted badly, and that one undermined this one, and this is going on." All this stuff. Ram Dass listened to it all very sweetly, and then he gazed back and said—because the teacher was all up in arms, asking "How can I fix this?"—Ram Dass just looked and said, "Hmm, attachment, huh?"

And that was all. Everything kind of dropped away because he pointed to how attached that person was to it working out or being a certain way. Like, okay, it is the way it is. How about if you love it the way it is, and maybe something better will happen?

People would come to him with their fear and their agitation and their depression, or even judgments, or even deeper things—with their cancer, or with a child who died. And he would gaze from this place of vastness and say, "Maybe this was the time they were supposed to die. Maybe they've done their work on this earth."

To hear it in a space where nothing seems to make sense when a child dies—it's so terrible—and he'd say, "Well, maybe actually it was supposed to happen this way. And we don't know. We don't know the vastness and the reasons for a human being to be born and to live through what they do."

The vastness that he held was such a field of love that people realized, "Oh, okay, I can do this. I can hold even this difficulty."

At the end of the retreat—Trudy and I have taught with him over quite a few years now—he does a little blessing ceremony where those three hundred fifty people or so would come by and receive a little wrist mala of beads with one thread from his guru's blanket tied into it. He would give them that and do a blessing. This year he was quite weak and couldn't speak very much. He was pretty frail. So he blessed all the beads and malas, and then one of his students stood there and gave them to each person as they passed. Ram Dass sat there and blessed people as they walked by, just gazing at them, offering a blessing.

He looked at people with so much love. In India, they call it the glance of mercy—when a teacher looks at you with so much love that it changes you. People would walk by, get their beads, gaze at him, and they would start to weep. I was weeping.

It was extraordinary. It was like Thomas Merton, that I've talked about other times, walking down the street in Louisville where there's that plaque for his mystical experience. The government put a plaque up there where he saw the secret beauty of everybody going past him, and he realized, "What am I doing in the monastery? Everybody's shining like the divine walking down the street, and now I see it."

And that's what it felt like sitting there, everybody going past Ram Dass with this field of love, weeping. And I thought, "This is how I want to live. I want to live being able to see in that way." I aspire to that.

Now, of course, what's true is the heart opens and closes. You can't just decide, "Okay, I'm open all the time. I'm just going to be like this and never change." You have to breathe. You know that. And love, and so forth. But there is a way to see where everybody you look at is kind of like the person you love most in the world—your beloved child, or your beloved partner, or your beloved friend, or whoever. I know you have complicated relationships. We won't talk about those. But you've got somebody that you love. You know you do.

And I do this: I look at somebody and I say, "Well, suppose that were my daughter or my son. How much would I love them and wish them well?" We have these lenses, this dimension of consciousness, where we can look at someone and then switch into love. How's that? Try it. Okay, right now. It's nice to talk about it, but take a look around and pick somebody. I mean, you're weird enough, so it doesn't matter what you do. And just imagine that they're somebody you really love, that they're like the person you love the most in the world. That's your daughter or your son or your partner or whoever it is. And you look at them and think, "Oh, how much you want them to be well, how you care for them, how you hope somehow that there's joy in their life"—all those things.

I do this on public transportation. And it changes things. I don't look them in the eyes—they'd arrest me, I know that. But then you think, "Well, what stops you from doing that? What stops you from loving everybody?"

I remember Ram Dass was teaching in Oakland. He did a whole long series of classes some decades ago about meditation, about quieting the mind and opening the heart, and then getting up and serving the world. And that included taking care of the homeless, among many things, which is one of our major problems now. At one point during that six- or eight-week series, where he was teaching people to pay attention in a different way, a woman raised her hand and said, "I have a story to tell, Ram Dass." She said, "Every day when I go to work, I take BART. And near the BART station for the last year has been this homeless man, this person who's been living on the street. And while I drop coins or money into his cup, I realized I never really looked at him. And coming to your class and kind of taking this in and gazing at people, I thought, 'Well, maybe I'll really look at him.' And then I got quite afraid. And then I realized what my fear was: that if I ever really looked at him, he'd be sleeping on my living room couch next week."

You understand? So it's really something for us to look at—what is it, what are the obstacles to our love and how we might express them?

Now, somebody asked me who's here: who's going to replace Ram Dass for the community of people that do love him? You know, Krishna Das, the great chant master, Jai Uttal, and so forth. I was sitting in San Francisco when Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh was here. Mark Benioff of Salesforce, who is one of his students, after Thich Nhat Hanh had a major stroke, brought Thich Nhat Hanh and a number of his monks and nuns to live in San Francisco so he could get really great medical treatment for about six months.

So we would go and sit in the morning. He couldn't speak, but he would be wheeled in in a wheelchair and he would sit with us anyway. And after we sat one morning, I was in the kitchen there with one of his teaching partners, Sister Chen Kong. She said that there was a big retreat at his temple in Southern California called Deer Park, near San Diego. I said, well, he's not going to be able to be there. Will many people go? And she smiled and she said, "Oh, it's full, hundreds of people." And she said, "That's because Thai"—as he was called, Thich Nhat Hanh—"has taught us that he's not his body and that we are him. So whether he's there or not, we are him. We get together and we are those beautiful teachings that he offered."

I think that's true for Ram Dass as well. I get quiet and I talk to him, and sometimes he answers—or it seems to. I also talk to my teacher, Ajahn Chah, who died decades ago, but he still has some opinions about how I'm living and what I'm doing. You know what I'm saying. We don't just live in this limited reality. There is something bigger.

Now, in all this is a hint for how to practice in these hard times—refugees by the millions, climate crisis, racism that's in some places growing, war, divisiveness. Mind is the forerunner of all this, says the Buddha. All of that really comes out of the human mind. Mind can either be—well, he says, who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can hurt you, harm you more than your own mind untrained—or the world, really. Who is your friend? Mind, heart is your friend. Nothing can help you more, not even the most beloved of you, than your own heart and mind, well-trained and tamed.

There's a text called the Fire Sermon. I'm thinking about Australia now, but I'm also thinking about all the fires that we had last summer and may well come around again. There the Blessed One addressed the company of a thousand disciples and said, "This world is burning. Monks, nuns, you have come together. And with what is it burning? It's burning with greed. It's burning with hatred. It's burning with ignorance, fear."

When we see the causes of the fire and then bring our loving awareness to those causes, it becomes possible to release greed and hatred and delusion and turn ourselves toward wisdom, toward love, toward connection. And this is the redemption of the world.

Now, that was 2,600 years ago. The world is still burning. And if we look at climate change or other things, it's the same causes, isn't it? Greed, hatred, illusion, delusion, separateness, ignorance.

So what do we do? The secret is that we have to tend the inner as well as the outer. The problems of the world, as I've often said, are not going to be solved by technology—not the most magnificent space technology, AI, nanotechnology, biotechnology, computers. None of that is going to stop warfare, going to stop continuing racism and climate disruption, because those come from forces of greed and fear and hatred.

Yes, we need to tend the outer world, we need to chop wood, carry water, do the things in the world. But we also have to transform our human hearts. You could say, well, what good is it if I just do my own thing? But you know where it starts. As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Somebody has to do it, right? And as Ram Dass said, you are it. You are the world. The world is in you. You are the world. And he said it was this sense of vastness and love—wisdom says I am nothing.

Love says I am everything. And when you get quiet, you feel your connection. The whole idea of separation is completely fiction.

I mean, yes, there is a certain dimension of separation. When you're driving your car, you have to stop at the red light and let the people at the green light go. And if you think, "Oh, we're all one," you will be—but not in a very good way.

But that's only one dimension. Ram Dass used to say you have to remember your true nature *and* your social security number, basically. You have to put those together in your life. But if you only are a materialist, then there's only fear. How much can I get? What do I get for me? But it's not who we are.

And then the goal is not some special state—"Okay, I'm going to meditate and have this fantastic experience." Well, you could, and that's lovely. One of the greatest of Zen masters, Hui Neng, says, "One enlightened thought and one is a Buddha; one foolish thought and one is again an ordinary person." You may have noticed this in your life.

So the point, the goal, isn't to get something—"Okay, now I have it." The goal is to become love, or to become, as my teacher Ajahn Chah said, "the one who knows," to become the loving witness of this world. Ram Dass used the phrase "loving awareness," which I also use now a lot. To find, in that attention that you bring to this mystery of your life, the capacity to be the witness of it.

And say, "Wow"—because you will when you die and you float out of your body. You'll see. You're going to go, "Wow, that was an amazing incarnation. I messed up in those parts, but that part was pretty good." Then you'll see. Then you'll have the next one. But anyway, you'll see. You actually are consciousness. You're not the body. You're spirit and consciousness. And you can witness, you can observe, you can become the loving awareness itself, as we did even in our meditation sitting.

And this brings a sense of trust as you do it, a sense of grace.

Recently in L.A., we had a big benefit for InsideOUT LA, and one of the people who was part of this benefit—Trudy and I and some others did it—was Father Greg Boyle. He started Homeboy Industries in L.A. twenty-some years ago working with gang kids. And he's your basic saint. And the cool thing about saints is they're not wearing halos and robes and stuff like that. He's like this working guy who lives and works with young men and women—and now middle-aged ones too—who are coming out of the undeclared war in the streets of gangs.

And they're people he calls "the discards," the throwaways. They've just been thrown into prison or shot at by one another or by the police or whatever. And he sees their beauty. He said every one of them has some great gift. He sees their secret beauty in some way. If you haven't got his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, it's one of the best books I've read in the last ten years. It's his stories of that work.

So one kid comes in, sort of strutting in with lots of tattoos and all his kind of gang gear, but he was forced to go to this retreat. He wasn't even that happy about it. Usually it's people who come who want to. He seemed unable to shake the scowl across his face, and I say, "Yeah, dude, what's your name?"

"Sniper," he says with a sneer.

"Okay, look, I'd been down this block before. I have a feeling you didn't pop out of your mom and she took one look at your face and said, 'Sniper.' So come on, dog, what's your real name?"

"Gonzalez," he relents a little.

"Okay now, son, I know the staff here will call you by your last name. I'm not down with that."

"Tell me, mijo, what does your mom call you?"

"Cabrón." There's even the slightest flicker of innocence in his answer.

"Oh, dude, son, I'm looking for a birth certificate here."

The kid softens. I can tell it's happening, but there's embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability.

"My name?" He manages to squeak out, "Napoleon," pronouncing it in Spanish.

"Wow," I say, "that's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your jefita calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yardus. Come on, mi hijito, do you have an apodo? What's your mom call you?"

And then I watch him go to some far distant place, a location he's not visited in some time. His voice, body language, and whole being are taking a new shape right before my eyes.

"Sometimes," his voice so quiet I lean in, "sometimes, when my mom's not mad at me, she calls me Napito."

And I watch this kid transform—from Sniper to Gonzales to Cabrón to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not pissed off at us.

So there we were on stage, and Father Greg was talking about his work as if this is just what he does, his job. But he also talked about how many people had died, how many funerals he'd been to because the gangs are shooting each other. It's an initiation thing—young people trying to prove themselves because they don't have a family that is intact, or they don't have a way to prove themselves. "All right, I will get a family in the gang. It makes me safer. Okay, now you are going to shoot someone and they will know you are with us."

If it were the Maasai in Africa and a young man had come of age, they'd say, "Here's your spear, go bring back a lion." But these are young people, young men and women, trying to initiate themselves. They don't have elders, they don't have a wisdom tradition, and this is the best they can do.

We were talking together and I asked him, "So what's hard for you in this?" Because he seemed so cheerful and loving. He said, "Ah, the hardest thing is when kids I love kill kids I love."

I could hardly breathe. I said, "Well, what do you do with that?" We were all on the edge of our chairs. And he said, "You know, there's still a lot of people left to love."

It was extraordinary. So much forgiveness there is. Becoming wise in some kind of extraordinary way.

The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent—or she. The day they forgive them, they become an adult. The day they forgive themselves, they become wise.

And so he watches these kids grow up and learn to be something other than they thought they were, in some moving and beautiful way. He looks with those same eyes of love, choosing not to judge. One of the great Zen poets writes at the end of his life, looking at all his struggles: "My old faults—like snow falling on warm ground."

I love this line. My old faults like snow falling on warm ground. You see them. They're there. And they melt away because you're so loving, so forgiving. You learn, as Father Greg did, to tolerate the messiness of life.

So, dear friends, anything we try to do of value, anything that matters, will also be hard. We will meet obstacles.

If you're a parent, you have to protect the little ones. I have this fourteen-month-old grandson who's now learned to walk. He walks around like an Olympic athlete—*I can do it!* Pure triumph. And those strong little fingers—he will get into anything, open any cabinet, pulling at everything. The poor cat now has an enemy, because he loves the cat. He tries to grab her tail and pull the fur, and the cat's like, "Oh my God, he's out again," and she dashes away. Fortunately, the cat's faster. But you have to protect other people from him. Mostly, though, you have to protect him—from putting the wrong thing in his mouth, from hitting another kid with his blocks. All the ways you have to protect this child.

And then they kind of get a little bit more grown up, and you have to protect them in other ways—protect them from the bullies at school, protect them from whatever comes. And then they're going to drive. Oh my God, what will we do? And then you have to talk to them about sex. They go through puberty. There are obstacles in parenting. Anybody who's ever parented knows that it's magnificent and it's also a piece of work. But you want to do it, and you've got to go through all those obstacles.

Or if you have a garden, you plant all these beautiful things and then there are the pests, and the drought, or the weeds, or a cold spell comes—climate change and all of that—or a hot spell. And you actually have to tend it. You can't just plant the seeds and hope they grow.

Or you start a business. You will have obstacles. Not enough capitalization. A key employee quits. The market changes. You know how it is.

So anything you do that has a vision—to bring a new person into the world, to plant a garden, to build a business—there will be obstacles. In Tibet, when you go to hear teachings or go to do some practice, they say there are always obstacles. And that makes it real. You have to get through the obstacles to do the thing that matters to you.

Now, in AA they also say there are no coincidences. So let me say something kind of radical—I don't even know if it's true. Maybe we as a species, at this time on the planet, need to hit bottom. That's what works in AA. I mean, we're still users. We're still using—the oil and the coal and the armies and all the other ways that we're addicts, really. And maybe all this, all that we face, is asking us to get to the very bottom of it and look anew as a human species. We have to dig deeper somehow in this and not just cover it over.

And so the despair that many people express, the anxiety, the fear, the overwhelm—we have to do something, to go deep in our own hearts and go deep in our minds as a species.

When we did a day on climate change here last year, in conjunction with Jerry Brown's climate summit in San Francisco—thank you to Jerry and to the state of California and all that it's doing—up here in front, I had a dialogue with Christina Figueres, a Costa Rican diplomat who was appointed to be the United Nations Special Representative for Climate Change. She organized the Rio summit and she organized the Paris summit.

The story she told was that as she was trying to get the Paris climate summit to happen, it got worse and worse, more and more difficult. People were recalcitrant. Nations were acting badly. She got more and more depressed and worried and afraid, and in some deep way was losing faith in the whole process.

A friend said, "You know, you need to step out of this. There's a place in southern France called Plum Village, run by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Master." When Thich Nhat Hanh first came to San Francisco Zen Center to visit in the 80s, I met him at that time.

The abbot of the Zen Center at the time described him as a cross between a snail, because he's very slow, a cloud, because he's so empty, and a piece of heavy machinery—because there's also something about him that's just unshakable and unstoppable.

So she went down to Plum Village for a couple of weeks or longer. And she said it changed everything. Because when she went in, the field that she was wrestling with was victims and perpetrators. Which country did it to which country? Who did it? Whose fault is it? And they were all blaming each other. When she left Thich Nhat Hanh—because he's the great teacher of interdependence—she realized we're a family. We're all related. And she changed the whole template of how she was bringing Paris together. One hundred and eighty-three countries signed the climate accord.

So there will be obstacles. And you will feel fear, anxiety, or despair. But it's not the end of the story.

Rachel Carson, the great environmentalist from fifty years ago, wrote: "If I had influence with the good fairies who preside over the birth of all children, I would simply ask that her gift to each child in the world would be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout their life."

What Christina Figueres did is what we all need to do in some way—to move from blame and judgment and anger and fear to a sense that we're in this together. To operate more from a sense of grace and mystery, because we don't know how it's going to play out, and then do something.

A French general—I think his name was Lautrey—ordered that a certain kind of olive tree be planted in the place he'd taken over after the Second World War. Some days later, he asked in an annoyed way why they weren't there in the garden yet. The gardener said, "But, you know, General, this particular species of tree takes a hundred years to mature." And he said, "In that case, plant them this morning." Let's not wait.

You come to the temple to quiet the mind, to listen deeply. You're with the complexity or stress or whatever brings you. You have a meditation practice, at least many of you do, and you use that also to get quiet. And to listen. To listen to what matters. To tend the heart. To steady the heart. And to find a kind of trust in this great mystery.

What's beautiful is to see the land now. You know how incredibly dry it was, how brown. It seemed like a desert in some way. And then a few big rainstorms came for days, and it came alive with green. All the animals here are happy. The ones in Australia are in trouble right now. But there's something about life that wants to renew itself. And the thing is, you are that life. You also are part of this renewal.

Deena Metzger, an activist and poet and friend, writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

It's never too late to start and to do something beautiful and magnificent.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching. He said the mind and heart—the human mind and heart—is like a piece of land already planted with different kinds of seeds. Seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love. Seeds of craving, anger, fear, hatred, and forgetfulness. These healthy and unhealthy seeds are always there—you may have noticed—sleeping in the soil of your own heart and mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds that you water. If you water a seed of peace, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness are watered, you will become happy. When the seed of fear or anger is watered, you will become frightened or angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.

This is the way it works for us. You become loving awareness, you look at your own life, and then you can choose what to create, how to act, what seeds you want to water.

As Wendell Berry, another great poet, says: "Be joyful, though you've considered all the facts." Because the world really is connected. And it wants to renew itself. It wants to renew itself through you.

I'm trying to consider whether to tell one more story. Ram Dass told me I tell too many stories. I said, "Ram Dass, this is like the pot calling the kettle black." But you know how it is—it's much easier to see it outside yourself than within.

So there's a woman who started a sanctuary for elephants in Tennessee. There were all these retired circus elephants and elephants that had been used in various ways. They were getting older, and she wanted to make a place that was safe for them. She got lots of acres in Tennessee—good horse country, now elephant country.

She described this story. She'd been working there for a dozen years or longer when an elephant in a zoo in Baton Rouge had gotten too old for them to take care of. A female elephant named Shirley. So Shirley was packed up in one of those big elephant trailers and brought all the way to Tennessee. They put her in an outdoor elephant pen next to where all the other elephants were, so they could get to know each other before she was released into the whole community.

Well, when Shirley arrived and the other elephants came by, she went a little berserk. She started trumpeting and stomping her feet and beating on the gates and the bars. They just couldn't figure it out. They did a little research. It turned out that thirty years before, when Shirley was just a few years old, she had been part of a group of elephants with one of the elephants that was there now, before she was sent to the zoo. She'd seen her friend. It had been thirty years, and she was just so excited.

That's what they found when they did the research. And in fact, that was the other elephant that came and poked its trunk through the bars. When they let Shirley out, those two became best friends—after thirty years.

It's mysterious. We are connected. And we can do something. It's never too late.

So here's a question. Let yourself sit quietly for a moment. What seeds do you want to water in your own heart and mind? And in this world? And what are the obstacles you'll face—the obstacles you need to overcome so that these healthy seeds, these beautiful seeds, can grow?

I have a possible suggestion for you among the seeds you might water. I'm actually going to hold up a book from my friend Paul Hawken called *Drawdown*—a New York Times bestseller about the most comprehensive plan ever proposed to reverse global warming. After crowdsourcing it around the world to the best experts, in the back of the book is a summary of one hundred solutions to reverse global warming—not just to stop it. All kinds of things: everything from food waste to the education of women and girls, which is at the very top of the list and would change the world. Yes, there's solar and wind, but there's all kinds of other approaches too.

Pick one. Just get the book and choose which one. It doesn't matter. Pick one of the hundred. If you want something to do, there are seeds to water. I really recommend it. It gives heart instead of leaving you feeling like things are impossible. They're not.

The second book that may give you a hint is called *A Bright Future* by Joshua Goldstein and Stefan Kvist. Steven Pinker, the Harvard professor who is really an anthropologist, philosopher, and historian looking at human development over centuries, writes on the front cover that this is the most important book about climate change that he's read. On the back, James Hansen, who is the head of NASA and one of our most important climate scientists, says this lays out the only viable path proposed for rapid global decarbonization. Christine Todd Whitman says this is the path for us. And it says how some countries have solved climate change and the rest can follow. Now I have your attention.

What this is, actually, is a vision of using nuclear power—which, you know, some of us who were hippies and activists boycotted. But fourth generation nuclear power plants that don't use water, that use sodium, that are much smaller, that have a greatly decreased amount of radioactive material which can then be reused in a cycle—these are not only incredibly safer than the big old ones that have scared people, but it turns out that Sweden doesn't use coal or gas anymore, pretty much just does this. If India or China were to choose to do this, or the United States—build a thousand of these—China, no more use of coal, no more use of oil. It could entirely change the energy needed to run a country, and these can be designed in a way that doesn't add to the danger of nuclear proliferation. It's just one of the many things in *Drawdown*, but one of the more important ones.

We sit here while the fires are burning in Australia and the climate is changing in all these other places. I'm particularly aware of this at the moment because we had all our own fires last summer, didn't we? Lots of them. I want us, just before we end, to do a little bit of metta, send a little cooling love to them.

But first, a blessing from John O'Donohue:

On the day when the weight ends on your shoulders and you stumble, may the clay of the earth dance to balance you. May the nourishment of the earth be yours. May the clarity of light be yours. May the fluency of the ocean be yours. May the protection of the ancestors be yours. And so may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to hold your life.

Let your eyes close again gently. Remember who you are. You are consciousness itself. You are loving awareness inhabiting this body. You are connected to everything, not separate from it at all. You are life moving itself through you as through all the grass that shoots up from the soil. You are the web of life tending itself, and you are the vastness.

With your good heart, picture or send blessings of loving kindness and coolness and care to all the creatures, the humans and animals of Australia, all those running from these great fires. May they be cooled. May the winds abate and the heat diminish. May the fires go out, sprinkled with love and water and tears. And may life restore itself, as it will again, there and everywhere.

And finally, bring that same tenderness to your own heart, to your own body and mind. Water the seeds of your own love and courage and goodness.

Thank you for your kind attention. Thanks for singing to the baby—it's a sweet thing to do. Drive safely out there; it's crowded. Be polite with one another the best you can. And come back to Spirit Rock sometime. Let it be a place to walk the land or come on a retreat, whatever would serve you.

Thanks, and good night.

CHAPTER 92

Calm Clarity Compassion | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 1h10

> *In this profound Monday Night Talk, Jack Kornfield invites reflection on how we navigate hard times as bodhisattvas—beings committed to the awakening and alleviation of suffering for all. Drawing on Śāntideva's prayer recited by the Dalai Lama and the inspiring example of Sri Lankan peace activist A.T. Ariyaratne, Kornfield illuminates how one centered person can show the way for many, whether on a refugee boat or in the midst of global crisis.*
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> *Kornfield shares teachings he offered to quarantined practitioners in China, emphasizing that difficulties become the perfect ground for growing the great heart of compassion. He explores how we 'other' the natural world through war metaphors and divisive language, and how true transformation begins with changing our own consciousness rather than fighting external enemies. The talk weaves together stories of Ram Dass's transformation, the power of empowering women and girls as climate solutions, and the importance of becoming 'loving awareness.'*
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> *Environmentalist Paul Hawken joins to discuss his work on Drawdown and the forthcoming Regeneration project. He traces the remarkable lineage from Emerson reading the Bhagavad Gītā to Thoreau's civil disobedience to Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr., revealing how movements arise mysteriously through countless unknown actors. Hawken reframes climate change not as something happening 'to' us but 'for' us—feedback inviting us to take full responsibility and act from love rather than fear. Both teachers call us to embody our deepest intentions, to be the person on the boat who remains centered, and to offer our gifts to a world in need.*

So I'd like to talk tonight in a way, more or less as usual, that's a reminder to you of something that you already know—not so much new information, but rather a reminder for your own heart and your own reflection to consider: what is it that you do know? And in particular, how do we navigate through hard times, and what would it be like to be a bodhisattva in hard times?

Bodhisattva is a Buddhist term, a compound word. Bodhi means enlightened or awakened, and sattva means being. It's a being who's committed to the awakening or the alleviation of suffering for all—somebody who's committed to say, "My life, my energy, is to relieve suffering and bring wellbeing to as many beings as possible." Some little task like that.

The Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning with this beautiful prayer from Shantideva where he says: May I be a raft, a bridge, a boat to help those cross the stream of the flood. May I be a lamp for those lost in the darkness. May I be medicine for those who are sick. May I be a resting place for those who are weary. And may I do so as long as earth and sky and stars and galaxies exist, so that I can contribute to the awakening of all, for as long as mortal beings exist. Some little vow like that. Fortunately, he has lots of lifetimes to work on it. But you do too. You'll see. Big surprise here.

Aldous Huxley said that an idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity. The religion of progress, of endless progress, is a substitution for the mystery that we exist at all—that the stars exist and that life takes all these forms. Endless progress. Remember when computers were going to mean you'd have lots of free time? How has that worked out for you?

An idolatrous religion in which time is substituted for eternity. And we're in the cycle in California. The hills are still green and the plum trees and the quince pop their blossoms. As Pablo Neruda wrote, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There is a regeneration. There's something about life itself that wants to renew itself and that will have its way no matter what. And we get to pause for a moment and look at that plum tree or those quince flowers or hear the bird song. They're more active now. They're singing because they're happy.

So this is a good evening to come to Spirit Rock as well because there's a lot going on out there, and it's a good time to pause and feel, as you quiet down, that sense of loving awareness that is who you really are—a sense of vastness or perspective, timelessness. That famous Ojibwa saying: sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky. To have that perspective.

And yes, we're in volatile times. There's the pandemic—coronavirus is coming to visit your town soon, probably. And then there's politics, in case you haven't noticed. All of that going on, and climate change, and refugees—partly all connected as a matter of fact, all those climate refugees and more—and continuing warfare, and continuing divisiveness, and continuing racism. It's a really uncertain time.

How do we navigate it as human beings? What's really our way in uncertain times?

The vast perspective. The image I like was from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who wrote: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates—and as I say this now, I think of the refugee boats in the Mediterranean trying to get to Europe, trying to get to Lesbos in Greece or to Sicily in Italy or across past Gibraltar; there are refugees in boats everywhere—when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with

storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

That's the image, in his both profound and poetic voice, to say: rough seas, this is your time. This is your time to be that person on the boat.

I think about my dear friend, someone I admire a lot, named A.T. Ariyaratne, who is the Gandhi of Sri Lanka. He's now in his eighties. He's been nominated for the Nobel Prize many times. He's gotten other great awards for being the best community organizer in all of Asia. I think about being with him in Singapore at a big conference a couple of years ago.

And the conference—it was a Wisdom 2.0 conference, a lovely gathering—was full of tech titans and CEOs and powerful leaders and brilliant people. And then Ari got up. He's a little bit soft-spoken, his voice gentle but clear. He stood there and said, "There's another way that we human beings have. There's the way of greed, the way of hatred, the fear and ignorance—and that's rampant. But I want you to remember that there is another way."

And he spoke as you find in one of the Buddhist texts: "Others will be harsh. I will respond with compassion. Others will be greedy. I will be generous. Others will speak falsehoods. I will speak the truth. Others may be arrogant. I will practice humility. Others will lack understanding. I will develop wisdom."

He said it in such a kind way. He just looked at people and said, "This is who you can be." And it was so different than all the other leaders who were there, because it was like he was speaking from his heart to the heart of the others who were present.

Now, in Sri Lanka there had been for some decades a quite terrible civil war. And Ari, who was a community organizer and a peacemaker, took into his home at times, as a sanctuary, leaders from the Muslim community—even though he was a Buddhist leader—or from the Tamil Hindu community where the war and conflict raged. I remember hearing through friends that the Sri Lankan military police came to raid his house at one point. They knew he had some leaders from the Tamil Tigers and from the Muslim community, and they wanted to get at them. But Ari was gone, and so was his wife. The only people left home were his kids.

So his eldest daughter opened the door. She didn't unlock the grill, but she opened the door, and they said, "We know you have these people and we want them." And his daughter looked back and said, "If my father were here, he would say you have to kill

him first. But he's not here. And if my mother were here, she would say you have to kill her first. But she's not here. So I'm sorry to say you will have to kill me, for I will not unlock this door."

Quite a family.

He created Sarvodaya, an organization that organized the villages of Sri Lanka. He was a high school teacher in the fanciest prep school in Colombo, and his students were the children of the generals and the ministers. He took them out to the lowest caste forest villages. And you'd think he took them out to help them, but he didn't. He took them out there and asked the villagers to teach these kids. The kids thought they were going to do something for the villagers, but instead the villagers taught them how to use machetes and how to open coconuts and cut bamboo and thatch things and create things. And then the villagers, who were very poor, put on a big banquet for the kids.

He flipped it. Because he wanted the kids to understand that everybody has something beautiful to give to this world.

And he began Sarvodaya. As an organization, they dug wells and built schools and built roads in villages until it eventually spread to more than half the communities in the entire country. And he said, "We're not digging wells and building roads and building schools for education or water. We're doing that so that people can love each other. That's really our purpose." His purpose was to empower people so that they would be empowered to live in a different way and respect one another.

Toward the end of the civil war, the Norwegians tried to broker a peace. And there was a peace for a certain time. To support the peace treaty, Ari called all the followers of Sarvodaya to a grand meeting in honor of Anuradhapura, at the most famous and oldest temple in Sri Lanka. Six hundred and fifty thousand people came—in a country that only has eighteen million people. A huge number.

And he got up and said, "We have an opportunity for peace. I'd like to talk to you about peace. In the Buddhist teachings, it's understood that those who are not yet wise look at the circumstances that they see now. But those who are wise look at the causes and conditions that create the circumstance rather than reacting to them. And if we step back and look with this vaster perspective, we can see that it took five hundred years to get into this civil war. Five hundred years of conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims and the Buddhists."

400 years of colonial oppression, from the British particularly. 150 years of economic disparity between the rich wet parts and the poor dry parts of the island. He described more of the conditions, and then he said, "So it will take us 500 years to undo this. And I

offer you the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan: 10 years of ceasefire, 20 years of rebuilding roads and schools, 50 years of learning each other's languages and traditions, a 100-year economic plan to include everyone. And after 100 years, we'll have a council and see how we're doing—and then we'll do it four more times."

When I heard this, I could have wept. I actually got the chance to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, which was a really cool thing to do, because he has his own suffering to figure out how to hold in this world. Because it wasn't the voice of somebody who's worried about the next election. It wasn't a voice of somebody doing focus groups. It was the voice of an elder who was willing to say, "Here's what's true, and here's the direction that we need to turn our consciousness and our heart." That's why at that conference in Sri Lanka, there were all these CEOs of giant companies and ministers—and then there was Ari. He just spoke from a different place.

The other night, I did some teaching online, naturally, for a large group of people in China who were quarantined and interested in meditation. They had read books of mine that are translated in Chinese, and so I tried to give them teachings that I thought might be helpful.

First, I talked about how the Buddha's teachings instruct us to tend those who are sick as if they were the Buddha himself—to tend ourselves, to tend one another, to bring the care for yourself and another together. Then I talked to them about using the circumstances they had been given. I said, "All right, it's enforced on you. What are you going to do with a month or two of this kind of time where you can't go out?" I was trying to make a little joke out of it. I said, "I just need to tell you, we have 100 people at Spirit Rock and 100 to 200 people in our center in Massachusetts who've just paid $2,000 to $3,000 to be here for two or three months, not allowed to talk to anybody. You get it for free! What do you want to do with that? You could sit there and bemoan your fate, or you could take this time and turn it into something that's really of value to your heart."

And we talked about the kinds of practices of compassion and loving-kindness. I said, "You have this Chinese treasure house that comes from thousands of years of contemplative life. And you know, the things that you value—the Tao Te Ching that Lao Tzu left, Chuang Tzu's writings, and the writings of Confucius—they didn't come out of nowhere. They came because of these people, the nuns and the monks, who sat quietly and listened deeply to the turning of the seasons, to the joys and sorrows that you're now confronted with. And they found a timeless wisdom. Now it's your turn. Now it's your time to do this."

And inside yourself—well, as the poet Kabir says, "Inside this clay jug are canyons and pine mountains. All seven oceans are inside. And the one who judges jewels, and the music from the strings of the spheres—all this is inside." Volumes of poetry are in you, yet unwritten. The music, the creativity, the longing, the vision. You don't have to go out. You can also go in.

So we talked about all of that. And then we talked about the bodhisattva—and in particular, about alleviating suffering. The vow of the bodhisattva is: if there's a place of suffering, sign me up. I'll go there. And you have all these stories about bodhisattvas saying, "Oh, there's the epidemic," or "There's the war"—and "I will go there and do what I can to alleviate suffering." Which is to say that the difficulties become the perfect place to grow the great heart of compassion. Where else could you do it better than in times of difficulty? In the community, in the nation, in the globe, the climate—all of these things.

And this is your lineage as well as those in China. It's the lineage of not just survivors, but of humanity that has triumphed in different ways and made beautiful communities over thousands of years. We know how to do this. We know how to practice. Practices of love and witnessing and freedom. Becoming loving awareness.

So what does this have to do with climate change? Here's Paul, my friend, sitting here. We'll get to it. They're completely connected. We're all in it together, whether it's the virus or the climate. It's us, baby. We're all in it together—the refugees, the illness, the loss of species, the loss of homes.

There's a general feeling in many places of anxiety. It might feel like it's too big. Climate change. Despairing. Hopeless. Politics stokes fear—you know it does. That's how politics works. Let's make you afraid. They want you to be afraid, actually. Don't buy it.

Cristina Figueres, who you probably know, was here when we were talking about climate change last year. She's the UN special envoy for climate change who helped organize both the Rio climate summit and the Paris climate summit. She talked about how she'd become despairing and despondent as she was trying to get Paris underway—186 countries. There was so much conflict and difficulty that she became really depressed and felt undermined. "I can't do this."

Someone said to her, "You know, there's this little place in the south of France run by this Vietnamese monk. His name is Thich Nhat Hanh. Plum Village, I think it's called. Maybe you should go there. It might help you."

So she described going to Plum Village because she didn't know what else to do. Profoundly depressed. And after some weeks in Plum Village, she said her whole consciousness changed. She got quiet. She practiced as we did tonight. And she said, "I realized that most of the climate accord problems were based on the model of victim and perpetrator. Who was doing it to whom? Who owed whom? Who was the bad guy?"—I'll leave it in the masculine; it belongs there—"Who were the good girls or whatever?"

Then she realized we can't do this that way. This is really how we got stuck. Her whole consciousness changed, and she said, "We're a family. It's not victim and perpetrator, it's us." Somehow that revelation changed her psyche and her heart, and she was able to go back to Paris and pull together 185 countries in this remarkable way.

Now, Paul, who wrote or pulled together, among other things, *Drawdown*, which I mentioned to you—in a crowdsourcing way, he got people all over the world to contribute to the possibilities of not just stopping but reversing climate change. In the end, there's this amazing list of the hundred solutions, ranked by the most effective. How many gigatons of carbon will it take out of the atmosphere? How likely is it to do? What are the political ramifications? What will it cost? And so forth.

It's practical. And it's also incredibly empowering, like Ari Ratana was empowering people to say, "It's in your hands." Because in the top ten, it's not just nuclear or wind—it's food waste in the top ten, and agricultural practices. The top technological one is refrigeration.

All the chlorofluorocarbons in every little ice cream maker and air conditioner in Buenos Aires and Pakistan and so forth—when those gases get released, if we don't have a simple technology which is easy to distribute that will transform those gases, they will undo all the wind or solar power you can build. So there's a tremendous amount of understanding in this work.

But the thing that's most moving to me is that in the top ten or fifteen solutions, if you take two of the things that belong together, they become the number one intervention before nuclear or wind or solar: the education and empowerment of women and girls. That would do more to reverse climate change than anything else on the planet. Yes, it's partly family planning, but in Kenya, half of the economy is being conducted by women on smartphones, and they make entirely different decisions about what to plant and what to sell and what their family should do, how they relate in the community—all of it because they're getting educated.

I just came back from Hawaii where I was part of the memorial for Ram Dass. Very moving. I talked about Ram Dass last month. One thing I wanted to say, because he inspired so much and he was so amazingly loving by the end of his life—he just loved everyone. You could feel it. You'd come by and it was like the love machine. Everybody vibrated, and in the room without him there was so much love because his picture was there.

And Krishna Das, this wonderful kirtan singer and musician many of you may know, said the line I liked best in the whole memorial. He said, "I met Ram Dass when I was eighteen years old. He'd just come back from India. He was Baba Ram Dass with his beard and his robes and beads, teaching. And I heard him teach and I was so inspired." He was an amazingly inspiring orator and teacher. "So I started to get to know him and then I followed him to India." And Krishna Das paused for a bit and he said, "And now, forty years later, I'm happy to say that Ram Dass became the person we thought he was when we met him."

Which is a really amazing thing to say. In India, they say there are three things to keep at a certain distance: fire, the government, and spiritual teachers. You don't want to get too close. But in any case, Ram Dass became that. He became who we thought he was.

The thing is that you can become that too, and I can, and Paul can. That's the beautiful thing. It's not just Ram Dass. The game is really to be empowered, and you can choose to act in this world. In fact, if you don't, it's because you've chosen not to act. You can choose to quiet your mind, tend your heart, and become the vastness that you really are, the loving awareness. And then you can get up and you can be empowered. The world needs you to add your voice and your heart and to make a difference. Probably more than ever right now.

And as you do it, be courageous and strong, but—because things are tough and they're going to get tougher with the epidemic and politics and all that—be extra polite. Extra courteous. Respectful and patient. Because people are afraid. And you don't have to be. You can trust. You see the spring come back, and that's your ally. You can trust that the world wants to regenerate.

Try podcast number 78. It's not too good, it's phenomenal. "Meets the Lord of Death." I mean, it is spellbinding—absolutely stand-up comedy Buddhism. You can't do any better.

And thank you so much for that. I feel like I've come through the looking glass. I've heard every one of the podcasts, sometimes more than once. So I'm sitting here with this sort of feeling that some night I'll turn on a podcast and say, "Oh my God, it's me." I'm so shaken up by that, but I'm so grateful that you want to listen to me tonight. Thank you for inviting me. I'm very glad you're here.

So—how many people are anxious, concerned, uneaseful, worried, fearful? There are other adjectives, but you know what they are. About climate change or global warming. Raise your hand. Okay, that's good. How many aren't? Okay. Can we talk afterwards? I want to know what you know.

It's really something. I'm so glad the worry bin is full.

Here's the most important question: How many people think the climate is absolutely perfect?

Ah, yes. You all should have raised your hands. You really should have. It is absolutely perfect. It doesn't have any choice in this matter at all, by the way. It is doing exactly what the climate has done for a billion years, which is respond and change. Get warmer, get colder, do ice ages, blow everything out, try it again, start over. The climate is perfect. Talk about blessings.

When you hear the term "climate change," which has become a standard phrase, the climate is *supposed* to change every nanosecond. And that's what it does, and it does it so well. If it didn't, we wouldn't have seasons, food, animals, critters, biodiversity, and beauty. The change is what causes that.

I'm the same person who raised their hand for the first question, and still am to this day, by the way. Every morning I have these RSS feeds that come in, and I cannot read them at night—I don't sleep well. So I read them in the morning. I can have the whole day to try to integrate and incorporate them. And there's always something saying, "Oh no, don't say that. Wait, we're losing our cloud cover." No, please, scientists, this can't be true. So you see this incremental expansion of the predictions of what an interesting predicament we have created for ourselves.

But for me—I'm not a scientist, I'm an English major—I have for two decades now, or more actually, been looking at and parsing how we talk to each other about this. The language itself. And for me, it just didn't make sense.

And it's interesting because prior to that, the word *sustainability* was being used everywhere around the environment. It became what's called a weasel word, which meant it means anything to whoever's using it, however they define it stipulatively. So it had no meaning.

When people used to ask me what sustainability meant, because of the influence of my teachers, I said it means alleviating the suffering of all beings. That's what sustainability means. And that took care of that one. Then we could go on talking about how to do that.

But around climate, I felt like what is so beautiful about the way we talk about it is emblematic of the cause. In other words, the semantics or the wordings that we use commonly, that the media uses, actually tells us what the cause is. And those words are war metaphors and sports metaphors. Very male. Fight climate change. Combat climate change. Tackle climate change. The climate crusade. Is there anybody here of Arabic origin? I mean, you might as well say Holocaust when you say crusade. That's a horrific event in human history. And these are the words we're using.

Well, what do they tell us? What they tell us is that we are othering a miracle. Climate is a miracle. And we're using language which the egoic mind always does—making a separation between self and other, object and subject. So that is the cause. That's where it came from. That's how we did it. We othered the natural world. We othered Native Americans. We othered other races—racism. We othered religions—Islamophobia. We othered women, apparently for at least two and a half thousand years, maybe longer, I don't know. But now we have Me Too. It's just such a humble phrase when you think about it. Just "me too."

All of this is about seeing it as other.

Occasionally now, when I'm in an audience, I'll ask people to do this—just wave their arms around—and they don't want to do it. I say, "No, go ahead, do it. Just close your eyes, just dork out and do it." And they do. And I ask them, "What do you feel?" And they say, "Air." And I say, "No, that's the atmosphere. The thing that you're going to tackle." And this idea that we don't influence it—I just did. I exhaled CO2. Boom.

When you understand it and see it that way, the inextricability and interdependence between all these things we name, we label them, but they're inseparable. Whether it's climate, weather, atmosphere, and this miracle we call life—it's the same thing. They're vastly dependent on each other. Biosphere creates climate, climate creates the biosphere, biosphere affects climate, biosphere affects the atmosphere. It's this beautiful dance that has been going on for billions of years.

So *Drawdown* the book, for me, was really a plea in 2001 to scientists and NGOs and academics. What I was simply asking was: Can we just find out what to do? I don't know what to do. And there was no list of what to do, how much it costs, what impact it will have. This was when the third assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change came out, and each one is more sobering than the prior one. Everyone I spoke to said, "That's a great idea. We don't do that. Why don't you do that?" I said, "I don't know how to do that. That's why I'm asking you."

And there it went. For years and years, I stopped asking.

And then in 2013, Bill McKibben wrote a piece called "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math." And it did terrify people. It was a good piece—he's a good writer. And people came to me and said, "It's game over. I'm going to move to British Columbia, take the kids, whatever. It's over. It's done. We tried. We worked hard." They were—the people who came to me were those people, the ones who had worked hard.

And what I felt then was that when people surrendered—when there was actually a surrender, "game over, we give up"—that it's actually an opening. It's really an opening for consciousness and awareness, because you know you don't know anymore.

And so, as Jack said, I knew that I couldn't do it. Even if I could, if you had a white male saying, "I know what the answers are, listen up"—that would have all the credibility of a lentil. The only way to create something that had some substance and credibility was to reach out as a community, as a collaboration, so that all the voices are being heard and working together. As opposed to what we often see now—and I understand their leadership—but I think that age of the white charismatic male vertebrate is over. Thank you, you've done enough damage.

Going forward, it's not to obviate or diminish the role of the male so much as to diminish the role of othering—of the male as an identity unto itself. And so that is where the language, the sciences, and the so-called actions come from.

What Doron did is put the word out all over the world asking for research fellows, Drawdown fellows. Almost half women, twenty-one countries, every major religion and some minor ones, White House fellows, Areca Con Award winners—just an extraordinary group of people came forth. And we worked together for three years. Drawdown is the result.

I authored most of it, but I authored it from theses that had been done by these research fellows—five, ten thousand word theses on each solution. Extraordinary work that they did. Half are PhDs, post-docs, double degrees—they're amazing people. But I was also the editor, which is what it says on the cover.

What I didn't say to anybody—and maybe I should have, but I didn't—is that the book was a technique. It wasn't just a book.

The first thing: the cover had to have the problem and the solution, both. It can't be just "Uninhabitable Earth" or "The End of Ice."

Number two: it had to be a collaboration, so that it had some credibility.

Three: no fear, no doom, no threat to motivate. It doesn't work, so it was an easy choice. We know that from every neuroscientist alive. And yet we still try to employ that as a way to get people excited about things and to do something.

Also, no blame, no shame, no finger pointing, no demonization of anyone.

The next thing: never say that you're right. Don't be right about anything. Be helpful, share information, have citations—but it says right in the introduction: "This is not right. We hope it's approximately right. You be the judge." Because as soon as you're right, you've made somebody wrong. You divide.

So next: no divisions. Don't divide the world.

And again, it's about verbs—about combating, tackling, fighting. All those verbs divide the world, divide it up. So we didn't do that. And then we tried to make it beautiful. In other words, to make the imagery so that solution number six—educating and empowering girls—is the most beautiful Kenyan girl you've ever seen, standing there with this grin on her face in front of a blackboard, instead of just black and white words about educating girls. Factoid, factoid, factoid. We told stories. And facts don't change people's minds. Only stories do. Only storytellers do.

That's why I'm a junkie for stories. Ramana said I tell too many stories, but that's it. I said, "Pot calling the kettle—we've got a little of that going on here."

The point is that with Dharana, we were trying to enter into the stream, the river—to enter that river of confusion, of anxiety, of concern, which is very justified, by the way, by the science. It makes sense if you're worried and concerned, of course. It doesn't make sense to be attached to it, but that's another subject. So how to enter into that stream in a way that actually was spacious, to create spaciousness for people.

And what's happened is that it is taught in every grade level in the United States—from fourth grade, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh—all the way to MIT graduate school. The same book. The fourth graders cut it up into pictures and then actually dress up as solutions and try to have their friends guess what the solution is

and what it does. I mean, that's how they use the book. I have no idea what they do at MIT. I'm sure it's rigorous. But the fourth graders will dress up as a pea and a carrot, you know, peas and carrots. And they'll say, "Oh, that's a plant-rich diet! Yes, you won."

I remember somebody asking me once in a talk. He was in the back of the room, and it was being televised, live streamed, but the streaming had stopped. It was an hour, and there were still hands up, so the moderator called on this person. And he was—I can't even do it to you, but I'll do it here—he was pointing, jabbing his finger at me like this, which is beautiful because it's universally a bad thing to do in every country in the world. I understood it. But he was saying in a very confrontive voice, "What do you say to the NASCAR people, huh? Like, huh? You're talking to the choir here, you know."

And I said what I always say when somebody asks a question, which is, "What a good question." Every question is a great question, because if it's genuine, it's a good question. And I thought about it. I said, "I'd probably ask him if he favored Kyle Busch or Chase Elliott for the championship." He looked at me like, why? What do you mean? Why would you say that? I said, "The implication of your question is that it's my job to change somebody else's mind. And that's not my job. My job is to change my own. And that's hard enough, I tell you that."

And so in this movement, this climate movement so-called, I just feel like there's a quality that comes from practice, from sitting, from meditation, from sanghas, that is remarkably more effective than the activity that is being engendered because it's a climate emergency, it's a climate crisis. And so therefore the amygdala responds and you think, "Well, I've got to do something quickly, and it's got to have a big impact." And then you start to feel all that anxiety—and you know you're off base as soon as you feel it, but you might continue to do it anyway because it's such a big emergency.

The quote I mentioned – there was a beautiful quote from William Stafford that I brought with me in my notes. I never have notes, but I brought notes for this. It says: "The things you do not have to say make you rich. Saying things you do not need to say weakens your talk. Hearing things you do not need to hear dulls your hearing. And the things you know before you hear them, those are you. Those are why you're in the world."

Which is such straight-up Theravada – like the one who knows, you know.

And from my perspective, Regeneration – the next book – is really about trying to draw out what we do know. We know what to do and we know how to do it. What we have not been called to is to come together in ways that are honoring, respectful, and listening-based.

The emphasis is on not the future. You heard in the last Democratic debate – every single candidate talked about future existential threat. It's burnished on their cortex now. But it's not about future existential threat. That's just in your mind. It's good science, but it's not a place to dwell.

What Regeneration says is this: if we're going to reverse this climate crisis, we have to pay attention to current human needs. If humanity isn't paying attention – which it's not really – it's because we're not paying attention to humanity. If the climate movement isn't directed toward the needs of the vulnerable and the impoverished and the disenfranchised and those who are suffering right now – who will suffer more from changes in weather, rain, drought, food, war, migration – then we're not serious about it.

This is not a top-down solution. This is not going to come from the top. I love that people get together every year in four- and five-star hotels from 186 countries to meet about it. That's great. And with all due respect to Christiana, who's an amazing woman, nothing is going to happen from that. You can count on it. It's been going on for twenty-five years, and the atmosphere hasn't noticed yet.

The reason for that is that these gatherings have no agency. A confluence has no agency. You do. You do. All agency comes from an individual initially. And it becomes a dyad and a group and a community and a gathering. And sometimes it becomes a movement.

Simultaneously to this, around 2001, I wondered: Where do movements come from? How are they begun? How do they start? I want to tell you how the Civil Rights Movement began, because I was a part of it. I wanted to follow the breadcrumb trail back as far as it could go to see where it originated.

Where it originated – literally – is Ralph Waldo Emerson's father, who was a pastor, giving Ralph Waldo Emerson a copy of the Bhagavad Gita. When Emerson read it, he wrote that he put it on par with the Bible in terms of its spiritual importance.

Emerson then becomes a pastor himself, and he marries this wonderful young woman. He's twenty-three, she's eighteen, and within about a year and a half, she dies.

And he is just heart-stricken in grief and sadness. His friends say, "Go to Europe, get out of here, get out of Boston, go there."

So he starts in the boot of Italy, and he goes up, meeting Wadsworth and all these amazing people. But then he goes to Paris, and those who've been to Paris near Notre Dame know that just down the river is the botanical garden—but then it was called the

Jardin des Plantes. It was run by the Jussieu family, and the Jussieus, before Wallace and Darwin, actually had a way of organizing botanicals and all the pieces and parts that were coming in from all over the world from explorers, so-called explorers. They had a topology and organized it so that when you went in, you saw this little wing and a bigger wing and wings and colors and so forth, the same with plants.

Emerson went there and he was blown away. You should read his journal that night. It's like, for the first time ever, he is joyous. He has seen the web of life, and he realizes that all of life is interconnected, interdependent, mutually arising. He just cannot write enough and keeps going on and on. Then when he comes back to the States, he writes the book *Nature*, which is an extraordinary book to this day, by the way. Extraordinary.

As soon as it's published, one of the first people to buy it is Henry David Thoreau. He graduates from Harvard and goes to Emerson and says, "What should I do, what should I do?" Emerson says, "Keep a journal"—which he did for thousands of pages, six thousand pages. But then he builds this little cabin on Emerson's land on Walden Pond.

A friend of mine said, "You know, I collect books that were owned by the transcendentalists. Let me send this one to you." It was over Thoreau's head on the shelf in his cabin at Walden Pond—by R. Spence Hardy, called *A Manual of Buddhism*. It has his margin notes in it. We don't know that story well, but North Boston in the 1870s was like Boulder. You could buy mala beads and Buddhas—you probably couldn't get Buddha bobbleheads like you can now, but you could get everything at that time. There was this just amazing efflorescence of Buddhism in the Northeast.

But it's pertinent because in 1846, Thoreau was walking to town and he was arrested by the sheriff of Middlesex County for not paying his poll tax. He didn't pay his poll tax because the poll tax barred African Americans from voting—which, Republicans are still working on that to this day. So he was arrested. His sister brought him some hot chocolate. He was let out the next day. But then he gave a talk at the Concord Lyceum, basically saying: when the government is unjust, the just person is in jail.

What he did is he took the shame and the ignominy of being in jail and flipped it—flipped it into something of a badge of courage and a badge of honor.

Four years after he died, there is this essay of his—the essay that he wrote, except it's called "Civil Disobedience." He never said the word. He never wrote it. No one knows where it came from to this day.

That was 1866, and then in 1906, this skinny little lawyer in Durban, South Africa, is meeting with a thousand Hindus and Muslims. They have decided to basically oppose the Black Act—which is basically apartheid and registration—and they agree to get ar-

rested. Gandhi goes home that night and says, "We agreed to, but I'm going to get disbarred. I just got my—I'm just able to practice now. And I'll go home to my family and this and that. We've all agreed to get arrested."

Somebody from the *Durban Times*—we don't know when—gave Mohandas Gandhi the essay on civil disobedience. They got arrested, and he held it up as he went into jail in South Africa.

That is so important because when Martin Luther King was appointed the head of the Montgomery boycott, he hadn't really had it. Joanne Robinson had it.

That was because Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat. And why didn't she give up her seat? Not because she was lazy or tired that night, but because she had been trained at the Highlander Institute in Tennessee, paid for by Clifford and Virginia Durr, who were still trying to get poll taxes taken away even then, in 1955. She learned nonviolence because Miles Horton had studied with Gandhi. And so when she didn't give up her seat, she was practicing nonviolent resistance—satyagraha—which is what Gandhi created.

And that's how King got hired and came to Montgomery. Within two months, they had blown up his front porch with his wife and children in it, and he went crazy. He was just so upset about it. He tried to get a license to get a gun. The sheriff wouldn't give it to him, but he had guns in the house. He had African-Americans who had rifles. He was armed.

And Bayard Rustin came down. Bayard Rustin was the most beautiful—I had a chance to meet him—just forget African-American. Man, you'll never meet. He happened to be an African-American. Spoke the King's English. Was tall. Could sing, act—he was just an extraordinary human being. And he was gay. Well, you never sent Bayard Rustin down to the South unless it was really, really important because he was so vulnerable because of that.

He brought to Martin Luther King—he sat down like this, he sat down and said, "What's that?" He pulled out a gun. "What are you doing?" King said, "Well, I'm defending my wife and children." And Rustin said, "No, haven't you heard of Gandhi?" "Yeah, I've heard of him." And so Rustin got a Methodist preacher there, and he came over and gave King the autobiography of Gandhi and the copy of Civil Disobedience. And that Sunday—you can read that sermon—that completely changed Martin Luther King's career.

Why do I tell this story? Because it's not about King or Parks. It's not about Gandhi. It's not about Thoreau. It's not about Emerson. They would be magnificent people no matter what happened. What I'm telling you about—who renamed the essay? We don't know. Who gave Gandhi the essay? We don't know. We know who Joanne Robinson is, but nobody knows her. She was the one who organized the Montgomery bus boycott. She was the one who brought in Martin Luther King. I can name more and more names.

What I'm saying is we have so little control, but we do control a couple things: our intention, our ability to let go, to forgive, and to be generous. Those things we can control. And I feel like the way a movement starts is so mysterious that it's not knowable. You can't plan it, but you can embody it.

And I feel like what we face in terms of global warming—if you describe it and get into the science—it is almost science fiction in its nightmarish qualities going forward. We face thirty years, no matter what we do. We face thirty, forty years of severe changes on the planet. There's nothing we can do about it right now. It's locked in. It's baked.

So to Jack's point: Who are we going to be? Who are we?

She has this wonderful flip—it's a prepositional flip. And the question is: Is climate change happening *to* you, or *for* you? It's a fair question.

Because if it's happening *to* you—if you're the object, the victim—you're going to blame, you're going to finger point. You're going to live in that mind. And that mind is going to see itself as separate, and therefore impacted, hurt, or harmed.

But if it's happening *for* you—which it is, by the way—it's a blessing. Global warming is a total blessing. Why? Because it's feedback. It's beautiful feedback. And any system that ignores feedback perishes. So it is a gift. And if it's for you, then you can take one hundred percent responsibility, stop finger pointing, not blame anybody, and you are free to innovate, to imagine, to generate, to create whatever it is you can do in this world that makes a difference. And you do it not because you're afraid, but for the only reason that this will be upheld by humanity—you do it out of love.

For me, if you doubt it, fall in love with what's outside. Fall in love with the critters, the creatures. Fall in love with everything you see right now. Springtime is the best of all in some ways. And it's out of that love of the living world that we achieve transcendence and a sense of... Like the thing Stafford said: the thing you don't need to hear is who you are. And what you don't need to hear out there is something nobody will tell you—that you are the miracle as well, as is your heart, as is everything we do together.

For me, regeneration is really about stopping degeneration. Come on, let's stop. We've done it. How is it working for us? It's not working so well. And it's about turning around.

I could talk more about that some other time. But that's why I'm a podcast junkie—because I get fed. I need to be fed. I get all the science in the morning, and then I get all the Dharma at night. I think it's a good mixture. Anyway, I just want to thank you all for who you are and what you do.

Thank you.

So Paul told me a story—we just have a few more minutes—about the publication of *Drawdown*. Now he's working on regeneration, and the words of empowerment and the stories he's telling tonight are such a reminder to us. But when this book was about to be published, or when they were considering it at Penguin Press, there were a lot of doubts, you said.

The accountant said, "Oh my God, it's got all these color pages in it, it's really expensive." And then apparently: it's on one hundred percent recycled paper, and it's not a hardback, so the *New York Times* won't review it. There were many, many critiques of all kinds.

You can tell the rest of the story.

My editor—I'd had him for thirty years; I'm kind of a dog that way, so loyal—he's the fifth publisher he's been with, but he didn't really want to publish it. He was getting a lot of negative feedback about the cost and promotion. It wouldn't get reviewed. They have to print fifteen thousand copies at a time, and climate books don't sell, and they're going to sit in the warehouse and be remaindered—all that sort of stuff.

When they publish a book at Penguin Random House, it's a circle. It's by consensus. Everybody has something to say—promotion, production, academics, editorial. And they kept going around for a year, not making any decisions. Everybody was being equivocal. No one wanted to say yes or no, but nobody was saying yes.

They had a final meeting. We had made the book ourselves—set it to type, everything—so we didn't need anything from them except to put it on the press. And the publisher of Penguin is a woman, Catherine Court. I didn't know this story until after the book was published. But she listened to all the conversation—she's a really lovely woman, very dignified and humble.

And she said, "May I ask one question?" And she's the CEO, so yes, you can ask the question. She said, "Tell me this—if we don't publish this book, why are we here at all?"

And it was a New York Times bestseller the first week. It was so interesting because everybody at Penguin was suddenly taking credit. Success has many authors, as you know.

And I asked Paul to tell that story because—why are we here? Why are we here? Why are we here?

I'm grateful for the work and the vision and the inspiration, and for the breadcrumbs, because you're adding your breadcrumbs to the common trail that we're on. And at this time, it feels really important that we practice—practice centering yourself, quieting your mind, tending your heart, being that person on the boat—and then offering your gifts to the world.

So let's just sit for a few seconds, quiet.

May you carry your beauty out into the world.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 93

Courage in Our Difficult Times | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 45 min

> *In this deeply nourishing talk delivered during the global pandemic, Jack Kornfield weaves together the ancient story of Nachiketa from the Kaṭha Upanishads with practical wisdom for navigating times of collective difficulty. He frames our current challenges as a cultural initiation—an opportunity to discover what is unshakable within us when everything external feels uncertain.*
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> *The talk centers on Nachiketa's three boons from the Lord of Death: first, the blessing of forgiveness, which Kornfield identifies as the essential starting point for any spiritual liberation; second, the inner fire of courage—not the absence of fear, but the strength to remain true to oneself and what matters; and third, the question "Who am I really?" which points to our true nature as loving awareness itself, beyond the changing forms of body and mind.*
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> *Kornfield guides listeners through a meditation practice of shifting from identification with body, heart, and mind to becoming the loving witness of all experience. He emphasizes that meditation's purpose is not escape but remembrance—recalling our Buddha nature, our timeless awareness that witnesses all arising and passing. Drawing from teachers including Thich Nhat Hanh, Ram Dass, and his own teacher Neem Karoli Baba, he offers practical guidance: look for the secret beauty behind others' eyes, hold difficulty with self-compassion, and recognize that acts of care during hardship are "love in action." The talk concludes with an invitation to return to daily life with a forgiving heart, steady courage, and the recognition that loving awareness is our birthright.*

Hi again and welcome back.

Now I'd like to offer a story, a long big story, and some reflections and teachings. I see them more than anything as a reminder that we need in this wild and unbidden and really uncertain territory.

Meditation, as we just did, can of course help us relieve stress and find a grounding and a centeredness. But the point of meditation isn't to get somewhere else, but to actually become—to remember—who we really are, to come alive in the present moment as loving awareness itself. To remember.

In Bali, they say when a little child is born, they don't even let the babies touch the earth for six months. They carry them. They say those who are closest to the gods are tiny infants who just come from the other world, or old people who are getting ready to return to it. And the people furthest from the gods are middle-aged people with mortgages who forget who they really are.

So our task, especially in this difficult time, is to stop, is to go deep. As the I Ching says, my friend Peter Levine threw the I Ching and came up with the well. It says to go deep in this time, down deep, where there's neither increase nor decrease, but something timeless. Otherwise, we can get caught up in all of the anxiety and fear, because part of what's gone viral is fear, not the virus itself.

The word pandemic comes from the Greek *pan*. It's also the root of panic and pandemonium. It's the wildness of the god Pan, dancing. This is one of the energies of life, but it's not the only energy.

Of course, there's the great cultural anxiety and global fears. But also, there's our response. I watched some of the concert and celebration of working people and healing people—the healers—the eight-hour concert that Lady Gaga stewarded with all the amazing and wonderful singers. Part of what was most moving about it was the clips of doctors and nurses and frontline people and bus drivers and people who were in the warehouses, all of them saying, "We're with you, we're part of you." There was a sense of solidarity.

I also love that there's so much humor coming out. Even in the face of all this, Dolly Parton wrote a song. Here are the lyrics:

This too shall pass as all things will, if the virus don't kill us the stay-at-home will. The kids are bored and restless, they scream and yell and squawk, and the teens and tweens they're just plain mean, they bite your bleeping head off. And all those loving couples that were once so sweet and cozy, now they fight like cats and dogs like Donald and Pelosi. Lord, get us back to school and get us back to work and get out of this goddang house before somebody gets hurt. And Lord, please find a vaccination in the form of a shot or a pill, because if the virus don't kill us, the stay-at-home will.

So here we are, all cooped up with our loved ones. As Jimmy Fallon had somebody tweet into The Tonight Show, she was already considering expelling her children from homeschool.

We have to deal with this and with one another. How do we do it? And what really matters?

A poem by Thomas Santolalla:

In the evening, we shall be examined on love. And it won't be multiple choice. In the evening when the sky has turned that certain blue, the blue of exam books, we shall climb the hill as the light empties and park our tired bodies on a bench above the city and try to fill in the blanks. We shall be examined on love like students who don't even recall signing up for the course and now must take their orals, forced to speak for once from the heart.

For us to speak for once from the heart. This is really the curriculum of this life and this incarnation in the midst of it all.

I want to talk about how we hold this and how we navigate this with the practice that we just did together and with a deeper understanding. We're part of the great mystery. The Buddhist texts begin, "O nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature, your Buddha nature."

There's that wonderful poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez, where he says, *Yo no soy yo* —I am not I. I'm this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit, and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk. The one who forgives sweet when I hate. The one who takes a walk when I am indoors, the one who will remain standing when I die.

In the meditation, we shifted from the experience of body, heart, and mind to become the loving witness itself of our restlessness, our doubting and fearful mind, our tears, our longing, our love—to bow to all of these things.

But of course, that's a very nice idea. How do we actually embody it?

I know being here with my beloved Trudy, we're mostly doing good, but once in a while we get on each other's nerves like human beings do. And I have a practice. I actually told her about it. It's sort of a secret practice I have. I think about the passage from Thomas Merton where he talked about seeing the secret beauty behind the eyes of every being.

And my secret practice, when I find frustration or annoyance arising, is to look at her—to look at her eyes—and see the girl, the innocent child, the young girl, the young teenager who's still in there with so much possibility and beauty and love. And when I see that secret beauty, the rest falls away. Even though I cleaned the stove. We are taking turns cleaning the house, and she came and said, "Jack, you know, you can't just wipe the grease away." And I had to learn a whole new deep dharma of what it means to properly clean the stove. Thank you, my beloved.

So we become loving awareness. We become the witness to the joys and sorrows, to the praise and blame, to the things that are joyful and wonderful in our life and the things that are difficult. And in this, we open to a deeper mystery. We open to a mystery of becoming that one who, as Machado says, sees ourself walking or talking—but we know we're greater than this. We're not just caught in our personality and in our small self. We are actually timeless awareness itself, the Buddha nature itself, witnessing it all.

The story I want to tell is a famous story of initiation. And initiation means going through a difficulty in order to find that which is unshakable. Sometimes it's deliberate—the Maasai will send a young man out into the desert with a spear, and the initiation is to confront and kill a lion and bring it back to prove that he is a man. Or a young woman in the Maasai people learns what it means to give birth and become a creator of the world through her body. But an initiation requires us to face a difficulty, to go through such a narrow place that it divests us of all our baggage, all the things we held as being true or dear, to find something deeper.

The great Zen teacher Karlfried Graf Dürckheim writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to those friends who offer comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

Sometimes initiation is deliberate, but most often it comes—as the Greeks say—as a *katabasis*, a blow: an accident, an illness, a divorce, a loss of business, something that happens in your family. But now we have the blow to our worldwide and global culture. It is a cultural initiation that has released some of the Furies on the earth. And if you look into the Greek myths, none of the gods can stop the Furies. Vengeance and the power of the Furies, paranoia—these arise when truth is not being honored. In the end, the only thing that could stop them was the great goddess of wisdom, Athena, who took them into her temple and made an altar and said, "We respect the truths that need to be spoken, and thus we respect you."

So here we are, needing to embrace all of the difficulty and go through it as an initiation, saying, "Yes, we will bring all this into the temple of our awareness."

The ancient story, the myth of Nachiketa, comes from the Katha Upanishads. Nachiketa was a young man born centuries ago into a wealthy family in the top one percent of the culture, living a life of privilege. When his father became old and was frightened of illness and epidemics, frightened of aging and death, he went to the priests at one of the temples. The religious leaders told him, "If you want to be certain to have a beautiful death, or a beautiful birth after death, you must make a great offering to the temple." You know how that happens in some forms of religion.

And so the father decided to trust them. He made a huge public ceremony, a parade in which he brought all his cattle and gold and wealth, declaring, "I give all that I value to the temple." This was his way of trying to buy security with everything he had gained in his life.

But his son Nachiketa could see the hypocrisy of it, the sham of it. You can't buy security with money. It doesn't matter how much money you have—you're still human, and you still have to go through what we all go through as human beings.

"I give all I value to the priests and temple," the father proclaimed. His son was so upset that he said aloud, in front of everyone, "All you value? What about your son?"—as if to shame his father for his hypocrisy.

Being publicly rebuked in this way, the father turned to him and said, "I give you—I give you to death." For he was mortified by what his son had said in front of everyone.

Nachiketa, as young men do, turned toward him and said, "I accept."

Now it was time for young Nachiketa to enter what the poet Dante called the dark wood that one finds at a certain point in life—the unknown. So Nachiketa said, "All right, my father gives me to death. I will go and seek out death and find what I can learn." He went deep into the forest and sat without moving for three days and three nights, through pain and hunger and fear, waiting to see if death would appear. This is like the poet Kabir, who said, "I decided to go on a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days."

Somehow Nachiketa knew that something had to die. He had to confront something deeper than his father's money or the acclaim of the community. I see this often when people talk to me about depression, or even suicide.

And someone will say, I feel suicidal, or this person I know is asking me about suicide. And of course, our first response is to say, don't do it—it's wrong. Treasure life. But there's another deep response as well, which is to understand that something does have to die. It's not the body. The solution is not the body. But that feeling that they have to

die is really pointing toward a false identity: the job that they can't do anymore, the relationship that's killing them, the speed, the grasping—all the things we've seen in the toxic qualities of our culture that have slowed down now.

Somehow there's something in that person that says, I know something has to die, and they get confused and think the body is what must go. But it's something deeper that's being called. And in us, there's an intuitive wisdom that knows we can descend into this. For as Bob Dylan says, "She who's not busy dying is not busy being born." Something like that. Anyway, Bob Dylan named it.

So Nachiketa went to the kingdom of death. And after three days of not moving—the fire in his body, the pain, the fear, the dark of the forest, everything that we confront in meditation times a hundred—after not moving through three days and nights, he found himself at the kingdom of death. But Lord Yama, the king of death, wasn't there. Only his assistants—war, pestilence, and famine—were there. He asked for the king of death and they said, I'm sorry, he's out collecting rent. You will have to wait.

And so Nachiketa waited longer. And finally, when death returned, his assistants said, you know, there's a very unusual young man who's come here to see you. And the Lord of Death sat opposite Nachiketa and said, you are indeed unusual, for you sat for three days and nights waiting to come see me, and then I wasn't here, and you sat for three more days and nights. And because you've come in this remarkable way, a courageous young man, and because I have not received you directly in a worthy way, I will offer you three boons, three wishes.

Now of course, we're in the mythological territory of a fairy tale. What are the three wishes that the king of death has offered to Nachiketa? And they're part of this story that has been told for thousands of years.

So Nachiketa sat and he asked for his first of three boons. The first was: I ask for the blessing of forgiveness. And this is why we teach metta now at the beginning of our retreats, and we weave it into our meditation, into mindfulness—why we call it mindful loving awareness.

Nachiketa said, I ask that my father forgive me and that I forgive him, that my father could see me with the eyes he saw me when I was his firstborn son. And the reason that this was the first boon that he asked is because we can't go any further in the liberation of the heart and the freedom that we seek without starting with the balm of compassion and forgiveness and love. For we've all been disappointed. We've all been be-

trayed. We've all been hurt in so many ways, ourselves and others. And in the end, if we are to live a free life—what Nachiketa was seeking, a new life, a death and rebirth—it starts with a forgiving heart, to not put another being out of our heart.

There is an extraordinary book by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was one of the great South African psychologists and healers who helped with the truth and reconciliation process. And she decided in her work to try to understand what she called the evil that had come upon people. And she spent a year going into the prison to talk to the architect of apartheid who had ordered the deaths and killings of so many: Eugene de Kock. And she sat opposite him week after week after week, talking to him and listening to him. This is recorded in her book.

And one night, after listening and talking on and on, he said, I think that I lost it all. It's the feeling of loss. The first thing that goes is innocence. There's no more fairy tales or Bambi. That's gone. We killed a lot of people and they killed some of ours.

We fought for nothing. We fought each other, basically, eventually, for nothing. We could all have been alive having a beer. So I'm confused. I'm so very tired.

And he hung his head down and shifted his legs to adjust to the chains that bound him to the chair, his eyes downcast, like someone reflecting on the greatest tragedy and loss in his life.

And the fact that she could go and sit with him and listen with an open heart, with curiosity—not even compassion, but an interest in understanding, a presence—was the very energy that the truth and reconciliation process grew out of.

We all have forgiveness to do. And in this difficult time, we're asked to do some reflections in the heart. What do you have to forgive, small and large, for your heart to be free? Some of it is self-forgiveness. Some of it is forgiveness of others. Asking forgiveness. But holding yourself with tenderness. My old faults, like snow falling on warm ground. When we hold ourselves with self-compassion, even the difficulties are held in a new way.

I remember sitting with Ram Dass, and he told the story of being with his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. Neem Karoli Baba looked at Ram Dass with so much love and gave him very simple instructions. He said, "Ram Dass, love everybody." And then he paused and he said, "Ram Dass, tell the truth."

Now these sound like beautiful spiritual instructions, right? But as Ram Dass said, "I was surrounded by this whole coterie of Westerners who'd come because I was with the guru. And I was irritated by them. They were taking up time. And the more I looked,

they were there on their own ego trips and they were puffing themselves up and they were grasping and grabbing and they were neurotic and their personalities were quite unappealing in many cases. And I looked at them and I said, 'Ah, but my guru said tell the truth.' The truth was I hated them. I didn't like them. I wanted them out of there. And then he said, 'Ram Dass, love everybody.'"

That was his koan, and he sat with it and he worked with it. And he said one day he was sitting there looking in the eyes of his guru with that glance of mercy—which is the name for when someone sees you so deeply, so lovingly, that it changes the cells of your body and you remember that you are love. And he looked and he said, "All these crazy Westerners like me who came—I love them all. I love every single one of them." And it was a breakthrough and a transformation.

And it asks us: What do we have to forgive for our hearts to be free?

This was Nachiketa's first boon. And it's yours as we go through this descent, because it is difficult. It's difficult for all of us collectively and in our families, in our communities, and as a society. And this forgiveness doesn't mean that we accept things that are being done that cause suffering, that we don't try to change them, to stand up for what matters, to stand up for care and justice for everyone. What it means is that in the end, we don't put anyone out of our heart. That we can wish everyone: May you be free from hatred. May you be free from fear. May you be free from ignorance.

So Nachiketa received his first boon and his heart became softened, and he was able to now live through the next part of his deep initiation—as you must do. To reclaim your heart in the middle of all that's so difficult.

What would his second boon be? He turned back to Lord Yama and said, "The second boon I ask for..."

His inner fire is courage. Remember, he's a young man—you know, the kind that says, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?" I remember that. I remember going in the forest monastery and saying, "What are the wildest austerities you guys do? Show me, let me try them out." That's kind of what we want to do. You want to prove yourself, but more than that, you want to find something deep in yourself. As Dürckheim said, something that's unshakable.

And he wanted to come fully alive. So he asked for

this unshakable spirit.

And here's a poem from Anton Taylor—again, voices from South Africa:

The sun rose each day and we the South Africans waited. From across the world the stories came, carried by terror. From across the world the virus came. The sun rose each day and so did the numbers. The streets quieted, the soldiers came—not always in that order. Unable to see or hear or hold each other, we had to unlearn how we showed love. We wondered what will it feel like, but no one could tell us. We did not know that we were grieving, only that we were grieving for something unknowable yet certain. So we the South Africans waited.

The sun rises each day, and so do the numbers. Because I cannot hold you, I must cling to these precious things—truths I do know, immutable facts which are immune to a virus. I do know we are South Africans. We have endured what most others have not. We, the South Africans, have survived many times that which is unfathomable.

If pain builds resilience, and if one can suffer without succumbing to cruelty, then perhaps, although many of us are sick and poor and unable to self-isolate, we are prepared in a way that is not as apparent, in a manner not born of wealth or infrastructure. You see, in a part of us so deep that it is fathomless, there is a key—to choose I or us, to rise together. And those of us who've already lived apart but together through so much, we've been asked to decide.

There's so much I do not know, but I do know we are South Africans. I do know our decision was made long before this pandemic, many times over. We have chosen us. I do know one day the sun will rise and the numbers will not.

This is what Nachiketa asked for. He asked for that strength of heart to go through everything that was difficult. And it's never too late to start. This is the time. As one of our great founders said, one person with courage is a majority. Standing up for justice, caring for others in the middle of this time, speaking the truth with love. As Nelson Mandela said, "Do not judge me by my successes. Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." This is your humanity. This is what's possible for you.

And so the second boon was granted to Nachiketa.

Now comes the last boon—the last gift, the last blessing. Nachiketa sat quietly. He looked at Lord Yama and said, "What I ask now is a great boon. I wish to know that which is immortal." Kind of audacious, this young man, making that his final wish.

Lord Yama looked back at him and said, "Really? You could have anything." And he showed him visions of royal chariots with great steeds—basically the Ferraris of the day—and bevies of beautiful women and consorts, and the best of banquets. "You could have anything. Make sure that this is your true wish."

Nachiketa replied with a question: "Will not all of these return to your kingdom soon enough?"

Lord Yama had to nod. "Yes. For all of these things are temporal, are impermanent. They rise for a time and they pass away."

So Lord Yama said, "Then I will give you your answer." And he brought Nachiketa an extraordinary gift—a beautiful mirror, handcrafted there in the underworld. He said, "I place this mirror in your hand, and with it pose a question to you that will be the gateway to immortality itself. The question I pose for you is: Who am I, really? Look deeply in this mirror and see."

It is what the Zen masters ask when they say, "Who are you?" Or "What is this life, this great mystery of life?" And you sit with that koan day and night. What is this? Who am I?

But it happens in a moment when you go into the bathroom and look in the mirror and notice your body has aged, that the fur is missing in some parts, that it droops in other parts. You know how it is. Wrinkles are coming. It's changing its shape. But even though you notice that your body has changed, there's that strange experience that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that. And that's because it's only your body that has aged. But the consciousness, the loving awareness, the witness of it, who you really are—in that moment steps back and says, "Hmm, how's this body doing in this incarnation? Oh, it's sagging here and it's learning there and it's getting this way or that way." You start to see that who you are is not this body, but the awareness itself. You become the witness, the consciousness itself.

This is from Be Here Now, speaking of Ram Dass. He says, "As we awaken, we watch the entire drama of our lives. We watch the illusion with unbearable compassion. For you are all form, you are breath, you are the river, you are the void, the desire and the illusion and the awakening beyond it. For you are beyond space and time, nothing and everything. Everything is me. And we see it all form in eternity as a miracle. Then you enter the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands. You chop wood and carry water." You return to the world to be in the world, but not of the world.

And in all that you're going through, the difficulties and the fears, know that this is not the end of the story. We human beings have been through earthquakes and floods, tornadoes and tsunamis, and epochs that include epidemics and pandemics over the centuries. And we've survived. It's in our genes. It's in our cells. It's in your nervous sys-

tem and in your collective memory and in your heart. And it was passed on to you by your ancestors and their ancestors, generation after generation. We know how to do this.

And when you get quiet and you receive the boons that Nachiketa has asked for—the loving and forgiving heart, the courage that is not an absence of fear but the courage to be true to yourself and what matters, even when fear arises—and then you remember who you are, the great heart of compassionate self, you get still and quiet.

And this from my beloved Trudy, who wrote: "When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say to yourself, 'It looks like the end of the world.' What you're seeing is love in action. What you're seeing in that negative space is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, our parents, our brothers, our sisters. Protecting people we will never meet. People will lose their jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses and some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment when you're out on a walk or on your way to the store or watching the news to look into the emptiness and marvel at all that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn't the end of the world. It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness."

And when Nachiketa had received this third blessing and looked deeply into the mirror to ask, "Who am I really?" and could see that he was in fact consciousness itself—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Since before time, I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which I pass. This body is not me. I am life without boundaries. I've never been born and never died"—he stepped out of the land of the Lord of Death into the unborn, into the timeless world, into the loving consciousness that gives birth to all that we really are, that was born into your body. And you could see the world with the eyes of love and return to it then, like the old man in the Zen pictures going back into the marketplace with his wine bottle and his staff, saying, "All I look upon with love become enlightened."

For something then becomes holy. Every spring crocus and newborn fawn and plum and apple blossom. I watched my year-and-a-half-old grandson pick up a pebble—and he could stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon or the biggest marvel of the world and say, "Look, look at this red pebble. It's a mystery. Isn't it beautiful?" showing it to Baba and Nini, his grandparents.

I believe it was in *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman said a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. Just the existence of life—ours and others on this planet among the vast galaxies. And here we are.

Yes, we've been through pandemics and epidemics. And what Nachiketa realized was that there was something bigger and more beautiful that he could find. And it wasn't just in the vastness, but in the tenderness between people, in what we touch and how we listen.

A poem by James Davis May:

Even on the night my friend died, even on that night, the feral cat, the one that's white and fluffy, still crossed our driveway quietly from our neighbor's pines to our own rhododendrons. Even on that night, she would look for some rodent or bird to terrorize. And I, drinking and grieving on our deck, was appalled by the world and its gross refusal to stop being the world. And then embarrassed, not just by my own naivete, but by innate human sickness that believes we matter, that something or someone is listening. That civility isn't just something we imagined and don't really follow anyway. That night, I wanted everything to be better than it is. So I went to the fridge, got out the milk, poured it into a little bowl, which I left on the porch and found empty the next morning.

And this is what we have, really. We have gestures of kindness and greatness of heart. We have forgiveness. We have the compassion that can hold all those who are living and all those who are frightened. And we know that we can do this together. And one day the sun shall rise, and the numbers will not.

I hope what I've offered you—the practice that we did together in the beginning, which in a way was the complete teachings for tonight, and then the bedtime story, a story to feed some other part of your being—serves as a reminder, as a possibility, as a soothing and steadying, as an awakening. I hope it has been food for the heart.

I thank you for being part of this, for offering your goodness to the world, and I encourage you to see what you can do and to be that one steady one on the boat, as Thich Nhat Hanh says.

I also encourage you, if you can, to please help support Spirit Rock so we can continue getting these teachings out. There's a donate button, there are ways to become members. I encourage you to feel part of the community, because you are, and we are together.

And I encourage you to take your time at the end of the day to sit quietly and tend your own body and heart and mind with loving awareness. At the beginning of the day, to settle yourself and set your best intention. And in little bits throughout the day—after you clean the stove and walk the dog or diaper the child or answer the email or go on

endless Zoom until you become Zoom-crazed—take a breath and feel yourself on the earth. Let your heart soften. Hold it all with compassion. Say thank you for trying to protect me and take care of me. And live in a great heart of love.

It is your birthright. It is who you really are.

Thank you, and good night.

CHAPTER 94

Meditation: Courage in Our Difficult Times

Jack Kornfield · 23 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers a comprehensive practice that weaves together the foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) with the qualities of the awakened heart. The meditation addresses how our bodies and minds accumulate stress and tension, particularly during difficult times, and provides a skillful path for releasing what we carry.*
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> *The practice moves systematically through the traditional domains of mindfulness—body, feelings, and mind—but with a distinctive approach rooted in loving awareness. Rather than simply observing sensations, emotions, and thoughts, practitioners are invited to allow these experiences to intensify and expand, receiving them with compassion and gratitude. Kornfield teaches the transformative practice of thanking the body, heart, and mind for their protective efforts, noticing how this appreciation naturally softens tension and creates spaciousness.*
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> *The meditation culminates in recognizing oneself as awareness itself—the witnessing consciousness that is timeless, vast, and inherently loving. From this ground of being, practitioners extend compassion outward to embrace all beings in every direction, connecting with what Kornfield describes as our Buddha nature and birthright. This practice offers both immediate relief from accumulated stress and a reminder of the deeper truth of our essential nature as loving awareness, providing a template for daily practice that integrates mindfulness, compassion, and insight.*

So to do a meditation practice now, let yourself sit in a way that is steady, feet flat on the floor, buttocks on a seat, and feel a sense of groundedness. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently.

This will be a practice that combines elements of mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, and other dimensions.

As you begin to sit, you do what I do at the end of the day. When I sit, I first take a couple of deep breaths and release whatever tension there is that I can let go of easily with those breaths. Then as I start to pay attention, I realize that I have to sense my own body, my heart and mind in a deeper way than when I'm going through the tasks of the day, whether it's doing the dishes or offering teachings or interacting with others. I really need to sit quietly and tune in and find a different dimension of possibility.

As I do, I find there are all kinds of things beneath the surface. My body goes into fight, flight, or freeze, picking up the alarm of the world around me or my own fears. My heart does too.

As you sit quietly now, having taken those breaths, let yourself feel a sense of connection to the earth, a grounding in which almost as if you had energetic roots going from your body into the earth. Steadiness, deep, connected. Your body comes from the earth. It's part of the earth. Feel that strength and steadiness. You take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human form and let your roots go deeply into the earth. Steady, strong.

Now from this place of presence, begin to pay attention to the experience just now. We'll go through the dimensions of mindful loving awareness.

First, bring your attention to the whole field of your body, the sensations, the energy of the body, the areas of tightness or tension that come from this fight, flight, or freeze that gets triggered in us, the areas of hot or cold, of pleasure or pain. Feel the whole energy field of the body with a loving awareness that has no judgment, but is kind and curious.

As you do, let the places of the greatest tension and the greatest holding in your body invite them to open, to increase, to get stronger, to spread out through your body or beyond. Invite them to show you what you're holding, and you receive them in the space of mindful loving awareness.

As you allow the sensations and the intensity of tension or pain, all the things held, to open, to get stronger, to expand, to show themselves, to be received, notice how as they expand, they also soften, become more spacious.

Now bring in the quality of compassion to hold all that your body has been holding with a compassionate awareness. Say to your body, "Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. Thank you for taking care of me."

As you do, notice how the body softens with that gratitude, how holding it all with compassion and kindness, just as you are now, like you would hold a child who's going through a hard time. Such tenderness. "Thank you. It's okay. I'm all right for now."

Notice how the body relaxes and opens as you do. It breathes easier. Space opens up. You're allowing the body to release and come to a greater, more natural presence, just as it wants. To open. To be felt, all of it. And received with love, with tenderness.

Now shift this same mindful loving awareness to the area of your heart. Notice what feelings and emotions are present. I notice at the end of the day that there's an accumulation. There might be grief, deep tears of sadness. There might be fear, anxiety, longing, love, joy mixed together with all the rest.

With this mindful loving awareness, sense what's there in your heart that asks to be felt, that you're carrying, sometimes carrying for a long time. Let it open, let it intensify, let it get stronger, more painful or more beautiful, more sad. Let the feelings open in the vast space of loving awareness, fill your body and more. Let them show you what your heart is carrying.

And you become the loving witness.

Allowing the heart to be felt—all of it.

As you hold and allow all these feelings to intensify and open—the tears, the fear, the longing, the love—hold them again with compassion, like you would hold a crying or frightened child. Tenderly. Not trying to fix them, but honoring them.

And say thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me—all these feelings. Thank you for trying to keep me safe. I'm okay for now. Thank you. Thank you for everything you do.

Notice what happens in the heart. How spaciousness grows naturally. How the feelings are received and soften. How the gratitude—thank you—and compassion for all of them, for trying to protect me, opens this space of tenderness and presence.

Now bring your attention to your mind—that very busy organ, sometimes considered located in the brain, but actually much bigger than that. Filled with cycles of thoughts and images, and perhaps now repeated patterns of worry and concern and imagination, cycling and circling, busy. Feel all the energy of the mind. Just notice what it's like.

Hold it too with loving awareness. Invite it to open, to display, to show its energy. Let it get more intense if it wants. Let it cycle and twist and get wild and imagine. Feel all that energy and give it space to show you the energy of the mind.

Bring a tenderness, a compassion, to hold all these energies with kindness. They're just doing their job. As you do, things soften. You can say thank you. Thank you to your mind, that overbusy organ. Thank you for trying to protect me. Bow with gratitude. Thank you. I'm okay just now. I'm okay. You can relax.

Notice how the mind too softens and settles when you allow all the energies to be held in compassion and loving awareness. When you offer gratitude, everything softens.

Now begin to notice something quite remarkable and important and liberating—as the Buddha would say, the essence of liberation.

Notice that the body with all its sensations and experiences, the heart with all its emotions and feelings, and the mind—you are able to pay attention to these with awareness itself. Shift your attention to realize that you *are* this awareness. You are this loving awareness. Not the body, although you're gifted with this body in this incarnation. And not the waves of emotion—the love and the longings and the fears. And not the thoughts and images. Sense that you are the witnessing consciousness itself.

You are the space of awareness that knows this all. Timeless, open, vast, silent, filled with love and tenderness for all the struggles of the body and mind and life around.

Rest in this deep loving awareness of who you really are.

In this loving awareness—like an ocean of peace or stillness, a vastness that contains everything—let yourself sense that just as you can be aware of body and heart and mind, you can also be aware of the field of being, of the beings all around you. Those making love and those in fear. Those being born and those who are sick or dying. The vastness of beings. Your loving awareness can extend and become a kind of loving compassion.

Just as you hold your own body and heart and mind with tenderness, now let the vastness of your loving awareness extend in every direction, as though you could hold this whole world in the great heart of tender compassion.

You can.

This is your birthright, your Buddha nature. Born into you is the great heart of compassion and timeless understanding.

Send out well wishes of love and tenderness in every direction.

From this place of stillness. Deep compassion. You become the lamp, the beacon, the healing heart—the medicine of the awakened heart, the medicine of love offered to all, holding all.

When a child is born, our first response is one of love. When a person is dying, our last response is to hold their hand in love. Who we really are is love itself. Our true nature. Loving awareness, consciousness itself. Rest in it. Return to it. It is your home.

So you just took a ten-day retreat in twenty minutes. Congratulations, you're advanced students, so you're able to do that. But really what I mean is that the elements, the foundations of mindfulness and the qualities of the awakened heart were woven into this meditation as a reminder of what you already know and what you know is possible.

Notice what you've learned from it, how you might use it—little bits during the day, or to sit in the morning or evening as I do and go through the body and heart and mind, noticing what's been accumulated and carried, making space for all of it to be received in loving awareness. And to become consciousness itself, that witness that holds it all in the tender heart of compassion.

CHAPTER 95

The Peaceful Heart

Jack Kornfield · 47 min

> *In this profound talk, Jack Kornfield explores the nature of upekkhā (equanimity) and what it means to cultivate a peaceful heart amid the multiple crises of our time—pandemic, economic hardship, climate change, and racial injustice. Drawing from the ancient Pāli chant on impermanence, he emphasizes that equanimity is not passive indifference or avoidance, but rather finding balance in the midst of change and being at peace with the truth that all things arise and pass away.*
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> *Kornfield shares teachings from his years at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery in Thailand, where he learned that communities of peace serve as essential reminders that another way of living is possible. He reflects on the qualities of those who become "warriors for the human spirit"—those who abide rather than flee, who serve as beacons of goodness, and who maintain cheerfulness and compassion even in difficulty. The talk weaves together stories of John Lewis's legacy, Thich Nhất Hạnh's presence after his stroke, and transformative work in San Quentin Prison to illustrate how compassion operates in the real world.*
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> *The Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths frames the discussion: while suffering exists, it is not the end of the story. There are causes for suffering, but peace is possible, and there is a path of practice—including sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and mindful loving awareness—that leads to inner freedom. Kornfield invites practitioners to see current difficulties not as the darkness of a tomb but as the darkness of a womb, suggesting we are collectively participating in a birth process. He concludes with practical guidance on maintaining discipline, dedication, and community connection, asking: "What would love have me do today?"*

I started with the practice of equanimity tonight, and I need to say a tiny bit more about it. The practice and understanding of equanimity is not to avoid conflict or to avoid change. Rather, it is finding a balance in the midst of it.

There's a famous chant in Pali, the ancient language like Sanskrit. The translation goes: "All things are impermanent. They rise and they pass away." That's the first two lines. The second part says: "Those who are at peace with this truth find true happiness." Those who are at peace with the fact that everything arises and passes away.

And that's the mystery of human incarnation—that death is stalking you, to use Don Juan's phrase from Carlos Castaneda. Everything that we knew, our childhood, what happened to it? It's back with the dinosaurs and the pyramids. Things arise for a time and then they just vanish. It's remarkable. And to be at peace with this brings true happiness.

I just turned 75 a few days ago. Trudy, my beloved wife, also just turned 75 a few weeks before that. We look at each other and say, "This is a big number." It got me reflecting, because I was fortunate enough to know four of my great-grandparents reasonably well, several of whom lived until I was in high school or college. They were mostly born in the 1880s or even the late 1870s, about a decade or so after the Civil War. They came on boats in the late 1800s to settle on the East Coast in Philadelphia. They told me stories of what it was like to live in Russia or Odessa or Turkey, where one of my great-grandparents and grandfather came from.

I remember my own grandfather, who was just a warm-hearted, loving human being. He loved his garden as much as anything, but he'd been in World War One. He would teach us the World War One songs—"Mademoiselle from Armentières," I'll stop with the first line—and other such bawdy soldier songs.

Then I realized: in this life, in 75 years, because it stretches both ways, it goes back to people I knew who were there almost in the Civil War. This is what we live. And it turns and it changes. On the other hand, I'm working with some friends in Silicon Valley who are part of the largest artificial intelligence project in the world. Here's my mother talking about people still lighting gas lamps on the street when she was a kid, and my grandparents' stories, and then here's AI. It changes, baby, all the time. And who we are—we are this change itself.

It gives us perspective. Like that famous Ojibwe saying I often quote: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." We're part of some mysterious dance that's unfolding.

Now, part of the dance unfolding right now involves multiple crises. The health crisis with the pandemic and COVID is affecting so many of us—all of us, no one left out. Even though we're not all in the same boat, as it's been said: some are in yachts and some are in rowboats and some are clinging to a piece of driftwood, but it's still affecting us all. The health crisis, the economic crisis affecting so many in all kinds of difficult ways, the climate crisis, and underneath it all, the moral crisis reflected in Black Lives Matter and the movement for racial justice and economic justice. All these are happening at the same time. How do we practice in the midst of them all?

I think of the years I lived at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery on the edge of Thailand, near the border of Laos and Cambodia, in a province that bordered both countries. A friend came to visit after I'd been a monk there for a while. He was part of the Quakers International Group that had been sent to Vietnam and Laos during the war—just on the other side of the river from this province—to do peace work in the middle of the battles. I visited him and spent time in those countries.

He came and he complained. He said, "You all are just sitting on your butts and there's a war going on. You should be out there making a difference." I've been out protesting—I certainly have. I've protested most of my life in different ways. But here I was, a monk.

He said this to Ajahn Chah, and Ajahn Chah replied, "Just stay here a bit, and maybe you'll see something new. Because you know how to protest, and that's fine."

After some days, all the fight and angst and anger, the stress he carried from being in a war zone—even as a pacifist, or especially as a pacifist—began to slowly settle. He got quieter in some way.

And then Ajahn Chah looked at him and said, "You know, we can see the tentacles of the war from here" – because we were near an air base. Bombers and jets would fly overhead, soldiers coming through. He said, "There's always a war somewhere. But what is also needed is a place in the midst of it all where human beings can come and remember that there's another way to live – an island of peace and sanity."

In this monastery, these hundreds of acres of jungle and forest where the monks and nuns had been living for some years, you could drop your wallet with all your money and someone would pick it up, save it for you, and give it back. You could fall and be in difficulty, and people would rush to help you. The level of care and ethics and virtue and beauty that you felt – of a community living in harmony with respect for one another. Ajahn Chah said, "The world needs to be reminded of this, so that we do not forget." And he would say over and over, "Can you make your heart peaceful?"

Now, I've been out for almost every day for weeks and weeks, holding a big Black Lives Matter sign. It actually says "Time for Racial and Economic Justice – Black Lives Matter" on one of the busiest street corners, first in LA for some weeks and now for weeks here in the Bay Area. People come by and many will honk, give a thumbs up, wave. Some people scowl, thumbs down, shout bad things – "All lives matter!" "What are you doing?" – all of that. And I'm just standing there, letting the traffic go by with my mask on, holding my sign.

I think of my dear friend Malidoma Somé, who is a West African shaman and medicine man and a remarkable teacher. He has a couple of PhDs from the Sorbonne and from an American university. But most importantly, he was truly raised as a shaman by the Dagara people in West Africa. After we had worked together for a number of years – retreats for kids coming out of street gangs, all kinds of inner city work, prison work, and things like that – he was called by his elders to go back and receive his elders' initiation.

There is a series of initiations among the Dagara people as you go through the stages of life. When he went back for the elders' initiation, he stripped down to a little loincloth. They gave him a calabash of water, took him to the center of the village, made an ash circle around him, and said, "You may not leave this ash circle for three days and three nights on the bare earth." Then they put an ash circle around his mouth and said, "You may not say anything for three days and three nights."

Once he sat there, they beat the village drum and announced, "Anyone in this village or the surrounding villages who has anything to say to this man – especially any difficulties, any complaints, any problems, anything you don't like that he's done – now is the time to get it out." And so people would come, and all he could do was sit there and let all the insults and all of the critique come and go. This was called the true training of an elder.

Can you understand this? Praise and blame. To be a wise person is to be able to hold all of this.

So equanimity, or balance of heart, is not passive. It is actually an attention to what's present.

I think of my friend Huston Smith, who was a very famous professor of religion. He wrote this great book on the religions of mankind. Huston Smith's granddaughter – it was all in the news one year – had been out on a sailboat in Tahiti with some other young people, and then she was murdered. He had this very deep soul connection with his granddaughter, this lovely, lovely being. And Huston, as you can imagine, was completely heartbroken.

People sent condolences. People brought him food – all the things one might do for someone who is grieving a great loss. He said the thing that helped him most was a young man who lived on the street a few houses away, a Native American. Huston said, "I would be sitting out on the porch, and this young man would come up over a number

of days and take the chair next to me, and he would just sit with me, being silent." Huston said, "That presence for the deep hurt that I had, that caring presence – that was the most beautiful thing that anyone gave me in this time of sorrow."

So again, we're exploring: what is the peaceful heart?

The near enemy – the quality that masquerades as equanimity – is indifference. Indifference is a not caring, a withdrawal. It's based on fear, a pulling away from the world. But true equanimity is being at peace in the midst of the mystery, becoming the witness to it – "the one who knows," as Ajahn Chah would say. The loving awareness, which is who you really are.

You are consciousness that was born into this body. And you get to witness the play of human incarnation. As you do so, you see the eight winds of praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain—changing all the time. Like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. These are the poetic words from the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra about this life. It appears and it disappears—praise and blame, gain and loss.

In the first lines of the Heart Sutra, it says form is not different than emptiness. Now what does that mean? It means that all these things that arise, that seem so substantial, dissolve and are replaced by the next breath, the next emotion, the next circumstance, the next sunrise or sunset. Nothing is substantial in itself. And who we are is the consciousness that witnesses this play of life.

Now I have a number of friends who've been sick, some of them very sick with coronavirus. I have friends, or people in my orbit, who've been arrested in demonstrations. Maybe worse than that, I have friends who are stuck at home with five kids and no childcare. They are working, they are suffering. There's boredom and restlessness and loss of money and fear and anxiety and vulnerability and alarm. How do we practice with this? How do we pause and breathe and let ourselves stay present with a sense of equanimity and vastness—a balance in the midst of change?

I will read you a passage from Margaret Wheatley—Meg Wheatley—who is an activist and a wise elder and a systems theorist. She writes about those who become warriors of the spirit, who carry the spirit in difficult times:

"Warriors for the human spirit are awake human beings who have chosen not to flee. They abide. They serve as beacons of an ancient story that tells of the goodness and generosity and creativity of humanity. You can identify them by their cheerfulness. You will know them by their compassion. When asked how they do it, they will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community."

The first quality she names is that they do not flee—they abide. They've chosen not to flee. As James Baldwin explains, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced. Whether it's the nature of the virus, economic injustice, racial injustice, or climate change, nothing can be responded to until we face it. This is really the beginning of what she's speaking about.

Then she says they serve as beacons of an ancient story of goodness and generosity. And that is who we are as a species, in spite of all the bad stuff you see on the news. You get the news of some shooting in this city and some looting there, or some war still happening someplace. What you don't get in the news is the one billion acts that hour during the newscast—parents putting scrambled eggs or oatmeal or rice gruel, whatever their national food is, on the table for their children, then cleaning the dishes, going out and doing something for their neighbor, working together with others. Billions of acts of humanity and kindness. This is the ancient story of goodness and generosity in which those who are warriors for the human spirit participate.

They become what the Dalai Lama has been described as: a lamp in the darkness. They carry a spirit even when it seems dark. And it's not really dark—not fundamentally.

If you read and study the Buddhist teachings, the most fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths, you understand that suffering, which is the first noble truth—that life has suffering—is not saying that life is suffering. Life is magnificent, unbearably beautiful. And it has suffering. Anybody not have suffering? You can sign off now and I wish you well. Tell us how it is. But life has suffering. And yet that is only the first noble truth. It's not the end of the story.

There are causes for suffering among humanity: greed, hatred, ignorance, fear, prejudice. Societies based on greed and fostering hatred will suffer. Lives based on this will bring suffering. But that's only the second noble truth.

The third truth is that there is peace—that peace is possible. And the fourth: that there's a path. There are practices of compassion and mindful, loving awareness, of living with integrity, of quieting the mind and opening the heart, that allow you to live in this ever-changing world with an inner freedom that no one can take from you.

I think of my new friend and colleague Valerie Kaur—we've done a bit of teaching together—who is a wonderful activist and filmmaker, Sikh, and a lawyer. She says the darkness we experience now can be seen culturally and globally, all the problems I've described, as the darkness of a tomb. But if we turn our attention—

In another way, we can see it as the darkness of the womb. Then, in fact, we are in a birth process. And anybody who's given birth or even attended a birth, as I have—because I certainly haven't given birth in this incarnation—knows that birth is not that easy. It's messy. Sometimes it's bloody. It's painful. It goes on a lot longer than you thought it would. It's dangerous in different ways. And there are contractions that come and then they pause and then they're peaceful. And then a huge new contraction comes. It's this amazing process, that the body becomes a channel for new beings to come into this planet. It's extraordinary.

And what if we are in a birth process collectively? Valerie asks, and I pose it to you. What if in fact it's not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of a womb of new birth? What if we hold it that way and work toward it?

Those who carry the spirit are beacons who remind people that suffering is not the end of the story—that in fact we've lived through pandemics and earthquakes and typhoons and all kinds of things, world wars and battles, and something in us knows how to be reborn, how to survive the difficulties. It's in your DNA. Your ancestors are cheering for you, saying, "Go, baby! You know how to do this. We did it before you, and now it's your time." The story is that suffering is not the end of the story, but human magnificence and care for one another and the possibility of a new birth.

And then she says something really remarkable: You can identify them by their cheerfulness. Now that's something to say in a time when there's so much hurt and pain in the world. And it's not to deny any of it, but here's the instruction from the Buddha: "Live in joy and love forever, even among those who hate. Live in joy in health, even among the sick and afflicted. Live in joy in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, quiet the mind and heart, be still and free from fear and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

These are instructions for the time of illness, the time of conflict, the time of difficulty—to find a joy in yourself in the midst of it all.

I remember when I first met Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and was reading his books. He's so remarkable. And he would talk about how when you sit and practice, you should put a half smile on your lips—that little half smile of the Buddha. You should smile. And I have to say, at first I thought it was like putting one of those yellow smiley faces on top of suffering. Come on, don't you have anything deeper than that? In fact, he's a very deep guy, but it's like, smile, smile. I asked him about it once and he said, "I've seen so much suffering. I have to teach joy. I have to teach joy."

And I think about John Lewis, who just died, as we all know, and all the things that have been said about him—that he was a kind and gentle human being, a humble servant who looked out for all of humankind. These are the things that the people who were closest to him are saying about him, that he had a deep faith in the central and essential goodness of humanity, in spite of all the suffering he'd seen. And so he was a gentleman and a gracious human being and a carrier of joy.

I heard a story today, actually. In the last decade or so, he'd helped create a graphic novel, a comic book series called *March*, which was all about the Selma March and civil rights in the sixties that he was so much a part of with Dr. King. And the person who helped him create that took him to Comic-Con, which is the giant convention of all the comic book enthusiasts from around the world. He gave a talk, holding up *March* and so forth. And then he put on a trench coat and a backpack. And he said, "In my backpack is an apple, a toothbrush, and the two books that I carried on my march. This is what I had with me." And he said, "Let me show you." And he went down from the stage and he began to walk. And the young people who were there got up and started following him. And pretty soon there were a thousand young people following him as he marched out and around the convention center, as if he was saying to them, "You can do this." As if he was passing on something that had cheer and joy and creativity, even in the midst of the difficulty.

You can identify them by their cheerfulness.

You will know them by their compassion.

The demonstrations that have been happening, not just around the country but around the world—highlighting the terrible injustice, the woven-in racism, the suffering in all these different ways—have been ninety-five or ninety-nine percent peaceful. And yes, there's been a bit of rioting. I myself am not a stranger to that from my earlier activist days, I have to say. And if you're a young man, basically you say, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here? Where can I sign up for it?" So there's that in the spirit of it.

Martin Luther King said, "Rioting is the language of the unheard." Or the African proverb that so speaks to what's happened in that part, that little part: "If a child is not cared for by the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth." If a child is rejected by the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth.

There's this longing in us as human beings to feel valued, to feel seen, to feel connected to one another. And if that's denied because you're born and your skin is a certain color or you're born in a certain circumstance, that longing doesn't go away. It still has

to find its voice. And now Black bodies, brown bodies, BIPOC bodies, nations are being presented with the bill of what has been ignored, for all the suffering. And it's time to settle up for all that's happened.

Some years ago, I was invited to San Quentin Prison for a graduation from the GRIP program. This was run by Jacques Verduin, a dear friend who had started, with the help of Spirit Rock, the Insight Prison Project. It's now morphed in different ways over the last twenty years or more. I was part of the board, president of the board for a while, and certainly helped in its genesis. Now it's spread through many prisons doing fantastic work.

But this was a graduation, and I was to be one of the speakers. So I went in, and there was the biggest hall in San Quentin. At one end were one hundred twenty men wearing mortarboards and graduation gowns, like a college or high school graduation. At the other end of the room were three hundred visitors, which included people from the governor's office, from the corrections department, local mayors, various people involved with prison work, social workers, friends, family.

The men had chosen a valedictorian to speak of their program. The GRIP program—Guiding Rage Into Power—had anger management, mindfulness practice, yoga, restorative justice training, and forgiveness, all these kinds of things. It really turned these men's lives around. So they appointed their valedictorian, who gave a beautiful little talk, and then said, "We have things that we need to say to you."

And they all stood up.

First they read a pledge that they had been violent men, and they pledged—now that they had learned—that they would never again use violence to solve a conflict or a situation or difficulty in the world. They offered this pledge. And then, following that, they made a deep apology to all the suffering they'd caused, to all the people, the families, the community, those who had suffered in some way from their acts, the families of others, even their own families, and everyone in the room.

Then I was asked to give a little talk, which I did, about beginning again—that it's never too late to start over and begin again, beginner's mind, the birth of a new life.

And then my good friend and compadre Luis Rodriguez, who is a great Latino poet, was supposed to read a poem. Luis and I have done a lot of work together over the years in prisons and with kids and gangs and all kinds of other settings. He's an extraordinary poet. He was the poet laureate of Los Angeles for a couple of years in a row,

and an activist. His poems, because he himself had been a heroin addict, had been on the street and homeless, in and out of working in prisons—he really speaks from a place where there's blood and guts in his poems. They're very real.

I thought, "All right, he's going to read something powerful."

He got up and said, "I can't read my poem."

We all paused.

He said, "I can't read it because all you men apologized to us, but it's we who need to apologize to you. Most of you were born in communities of poverty, of drug use, held and surrounded in the field of racism and disrespect for who you are. You were children brought up in communities where there wasn't economic opportunity and work and decent education. We failed you. It's we who need to offer you an apology."

When he finished saying that, the room got silent. No one could speak because they knew he was telling another piece of the truth that needed to be voiced.

This is really the heart of compassion—that can look and see those who've suffered, and also those who are causing suffering out of their ignorance, all of them, and hold them in the great heart of compassion.

You can identify them by their cheerfulness. You can know them by their compassion.

When asked how they do it, they will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community.

Discipline. For almost everyone in this COVID time, one of the most important things to learn is a kind of routine for your life. It gets chaotic if you don't have a routine. How do you make a schedule that takes time for silence, for yourself, for meditation?

I've been doing all kinds of teaching, but I was working with groups of first responders, including my daughter's organization, Oasis Legal Services, which gets asylum for people whose lives are in danger from around the world. They're often the first people that these folks seeking asylum will ever have told their whole story to. About what it's like to be a gay man in Uganda, knowing that if anyone finds out, you're likely to be stoned to death. Or to be a lesbian coming from Guatemala where you've been raped by family members to "fix" you—one story after another. Or a transgender person who came from Saudi Arabia, if you can imagine that.

In working with the staff, because there's all the secondary trauma as well, I said, "You need backup. I don't know what you believe in, but in every one of your offices, you should make a little altar. Maybe you put Guadalupe or Maria. Maybe you put Buddha or Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion. Maybe you put Kali because you need her fierceness. I don't know, but it's not for you to hold in your bodies. You need to go in and light a candle and say, 'All right, Kali. All right, Guadalupe. All right, Mother Mary. I'll do your work. But you have to carry this. It's not my job to carry it.'"

And make rituals. Wash your hands and face between each client. Do a scan through your body. I'm talking about this for first responders, but it's really all of us in some way. We're now on the front lines of what's happening in the world, protected though you may be. You need to find your own discipline and your own routine and your own steadiness and your own practices in the midst of it all.

Then she says, they will tell you about discipline and dedication. Dedication is the bodhisattva vows. Amidst the suffering of the world, may I be a lamp in the darkness, food for the hungry, medicine for the sick, a resting place for the weary. "May I do this as long as beings exist," chants the Dalai Lama, "so that my life and all lives come together to alleviate the sufferings of the world and bring everyone into peace."

This is a really uncertain time. We are in a great birth process that we can hope gives something new to the world, that some birth happens that we get to be a part of. For those of you who've been around a birth, there are times to breathe—remember that instruction, breathe. There are times to push; that's part of the dedication, but not always. And there are times just to step back and feel the mystery of life coming through you, the life of this universe coming through you in this mystery.

As Thomas Merton taught a young activist, do not depend on the hope of results—because what's true for us is that we can do all that we can, but we don't get to choose the results. As you see this more and more deeply, as you plant seeds of goodness, as you care for the world, more and more you realize that it's not in your hands. You focus on the truth and the value and the rightness of the work itself. You're dedicated to plant seeds of goodness, to care for things in the world.

And if you're someone with privilege—which is a lot of us listening to this talk, because I'm talking to myself all these days as well—it's not about guilt or shame. There's another way to see it. It is your assignment. You've been given the cosmic assignment to have privilege and then to use it, to set your intention and say, "How can I use this privilege in a way that makes the world a more beautiful place?" And by beautiful, I mean in every way—a just place and a caring place.

They will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community. Community is the only way. Together, we are attending the birth of something new, messy though it may be. When you go into hospitals—hopefully you don't have to, but sometimes it happens—the doctor who comes down the ward, whoever she or he is, is called the attending. The attending physician. The attending.

This is your job. You have the assignment with your privilege, wherever you are, and you now have become the attending one to the new birth of the world. And you want to do it with love and a peaceful heart, because the world doesn't need more hate, and it doesn't need more fear, and it doesn't need more ignorance and confusion.

You are loving awareness. This is your true nature. This is what was born into you.

You are consciousness. You are loving awareness manifesting through this really bizarre experiment that the cosmos has decided to make you. In all the galaxies of the universe, there's never been quite something as unique and strange as you. And now the cosmos is saying, "All right, let's do something interesting with this." You are the cosmos born in this way. You are loving awareness, the consciousness that is who you are, that was born into your body.

Thich Nhat Hanh was brought here to San Francisco a couple of years ago after he suffered a major stroke. At that time, he was 89 or 90. He was in France at Plum Village and for a while in the French hospitals, getting good care. But then a friend in Silicon Valley who is very much a student of Thich Nhat Hanh flew him and a whole group of his monks and nuns here so that they could receive top medical care from UC and Stanford. And there he was, living in San Francisco in a place set up by Mark Benioff from Salesforce—I will use his name, wonderful friend.

In the mornings, Thich Nhat Hanh would be rolled in in a wheelchair. He couldn't speak and he could just barely move one arm, and he'd been in considerable pain. But they set up one of the rooms where they were all staying as a zendo, as a meditation hall. He would be wheeled in and the bell would be struck and we would all sit for forty minutes and Thich Nhat Hanh would be there. Then they would ring the bell at the end.

The last morning before he went back to France—he'd been here in the Bay Area for six months or more for treatment—Trudy and I went to sit with him and join that group. When the bell was struck at the end of the sitting, he deliberately looked around and gazed at the eyes of everyone there. He looked at me, and I've known him for years. He looked at others.

Trudy is the one that noticed this. She said to me, "Do you remember, did you look at his eyes?" Because she said—and I could see it—one eye was tremendously present, like he was acknowledging each person that was there. This beautiful sense of mindful, loving presence. She said, "One eye was here, fully present, and one eye was on eternity." And you could see it, as if he was holding both. Here he was, ninety years old with a stroke. He knew the dance of birth and death. He'd seen it his whole life. One eye on eternity and one eye completely present where we are.

Then we went into the kitchen afterward. He was taken back by his caregivers. I was sitting with Sister Chân Không, who is the female counterpart and leader in his community for years and years. We were talking about how there was a big retreat happening down at Deer Park in Southern California that very week. I said, "Well, because Thich Nhat Hanh had this terrible stroke and won't be there, are people coming anyway?" She said, "Oh yes, six hundred people are arriving today." Then she paused and she said, "He taught us that we are him and he is us. That the community itself is really the carrier of the Dharma." He said that in other ways when he said the next Buddha to come in this world, the next Buddha is the Sangha. He taught us that we are him and he is us.

So as I finish, I'd like you to imagine—maybe you can even lift your hands up for a moment on either side of your body—and imagine that you're holding hands with all the other people who are listening tonight. There are a thousand or two thousand or ten thousand, however many, it's quite a few actually. And we're all in the circle holding hands together. You're the ones that abide, that have chosen not to flee, known by your goodness and generosity, discipline and dedication. Feel the necessity of community, feel that we carry each other in our hearts and in our beings.

And maybe the only question to ask is: What would love have me do today? What would love have me do with all of you together? What would love have us do together?

With this, I thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 96

Q and A: The Peaceful Heart | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 30 min

> *In this intimate question and answer session, Jack Kornfield engages with practitioners navigating the challenges of isolation, social justice, and service during times of crisis. The conversation opens with a poignant question from an elder seeking meaningful ways to contribute while sheltering in place, leading to practical guidance about finding volunteer opportunities aligned with one's deepest values.*
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> *Kornfield addresses the visceral experience of witnessing societal suffering—the anger at slow progress on racial justice, the fear accompanying uncertain times, and the exhaustion of healthcare workers on the front lines. Drawing on the teaching from the Sedaka Sutta about the bamboo acrobats, he emphasizes that caring for oneself is inseparable from caring for others. For those holding others' pain professionally, he suggests creating rituals of release—sweeping through the body, offering burdens to the earth or to Kuan Yin—so that suffering need not accumulate.*
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> *The session also explores white awakening work and its relationship to Buddhist teachings, with Kornfield pointing to the Buddha's radical inclusion across caste lines as precedent. He encourages practitioners doing anti-racism work to recognize that the discomfort they encounter mirrors what marginalized communities have long experienced, and to respond with love rather than argument. Throughout, Kornfield returns to the theme that underneath anger lies caring, underneath fear lies love, and that the ancient story of human goodness lives within each practitioner ready to find expression.*

For those who want to stay a little longer, we have maybe fifteen minutes or so for questions or dialogue.

"Jack, what can I do during this time to help or be of service—to the world or to anybody? I feel like I'm just in this shelter, locked up by myself, not doing any good for anyone. Why am I even here? I'm wondering if you can suggest what path I might take to be of some help."

You know, there's a difference between being an older and an elder. An elder is actually the role that you inhabit to be there for others. And I hear that beautifully in your question. You want to do something meaningful—not just be old, but actually inhabit that role of elder.

So let me ask you: what do you care about?

"I care about justice. I care about trying to alleviate suffering in the world, however I can do that. Just to be of service, to somehow be important in accomplishing something along those lines—helping people."

Beautiful. So what I'm going to suggest, since you do need to protect yourself and stay sequestered—and since you're online with me, you obviously know how to do this—is that you go online to certain organizations. You could go to vote.org, which is trying to get out the vote across the country. They will give you ways to send messages or texts or emails to people. You could go to Southern Poverty Law Center, which has been fighting for justice for years, and say, "I want to volunteer. How can I help?" Go to Amnesty International or the ACLU or whatever is close to your heart and say, "I want to volunteer. I want to use my time." And even if you get turned down in two or three places, sooner or later somebody is going to say, "Yes, we have just something for you to do."

"What's alive for me right now is this idea of birth—having given birth and having these really intense images coming. As we are rebirthing or birthing this new world and holding hands with the ten thousand warriors of light that might be plugged into this process, I'm struggling with: what if the midwife is indifference? What about those gatekeepers who say, 'Get out of this laboring room, let's C-section this baby because we're in a hurry, there's an economy to open'? The indifference of those who hold power—perhaps forcing this baby to be born in ways that might be stillborn."

First, I just want to feel into your question. You're concerned—really concerned—because there are things happening from the government or people of power that are destructive, that are undermining what good could come of these crises. We could talk about all the ways that's true. And I feel the concern and the caring underneath.

But I just need to remind you of something: it's women who give birth, and nothing can stop them. Just feel that. It doesn't matter if there are people in power—women know how to do it. Nothing stops that. And I want you to feel and own that there is something in you in spite of all this.

As I said, we've gone through this for centuries and millennia—bad leadership and epidemics and tragedies. And it's women more than men who have kept it all together, who give birth to the new. So I'm not worried about the power when I look into the eyes of the women of this world. There's something else that's here. And I really trust that power.

"Yeah, I'll keep practicing. The fear is very alive, for sure."

The fear is under there.

As I've witnessed, babies often don't get born because of interruptions and external interventions. And this is a big baby—we're all in it. But the women know how to do it.

"Hi, Jack. Like many of us, I'm feeling a lot of anger and frustration at what little progress we've made as a race, as a human race. I, like many others probably on this call, was in Washington DC fifty years ago and thought perhaps we wouldn't have to do it again. And now I'm not sure we've made much progress. I'd like to look back on 2020 and not say, 'What did I miss?' but rather, 'What did I accomplish? What was I able to do?' You bring up a good point about creating a broader awareness. Racial injustice is what's really getting to me these days, and I'd like to reach out and try to do something about it by bringing that broader awareness, by being one of your warriors. Now, I'm an early practitioner, and a lot of my friends and family are back in Michigan, where they're all early practitioners too. What might be a short list I can remember and bring to my friends and family—something that helps relate this message of how the Dharma can help us with our white privilege and how that might affect solving some of this injustice?"

Thank you for the question because it's so to the point of what's happening now. When I go back to your first sentence or two, you said you were angry. And when you feel that anger, what's underneath it?

"Mostly what little progress we've made, and what I've been able to do along the way as well."

So I want to point to something else that might be there. Yes, the anger is there because we've made too little progress. But I would say the anger is also there because you care. That anger wouldn't be there if it didn't matter to you. There's a kind of passion in you, a fire, a caring that's actually very deep. The anger is as big as it is because it matters that much to you.

I don't have a simple answer for what the ideal practice is. In some way, you have to listen inside. I think of my colleague, teacher, and friend Maha Ghosananda, the Gandhi of Cambodia that I talk about frequently, whose all nineteen members of his family were murdered. He led those peace walks through Cambodia, chanting, "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed."

For some people, it's a practice of compassion and loving-kindness that you undertake so that every human being you see, you offer them a blessing. For others, it's something very active as well. You say, "I'm going to work on getting out the vote." Personally, I am doing that. We have a project to mobilize all the Dharma communities and all the yoga practitioners and teachers around the country—yoga teachers and Buddhist meditators helping get out the vote, not just your own vote, but helping others vote too.

So find an inner practice that nourishes you and strengthens you. There is a book I wrote—it's not really about social justice, more in the flavor of what we did this evening about a peaceful heart. It's called *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. There are some practices or passages in there that may be helpful.

In terms of your family and friends in Michigan, I think the big thing is if you express your care, even more than your anger. If you say, "Not only do I care, but here's what I'm doing." People learn in resonance with one another, and if they feel like, "Hey, Dan is really doing something—I want to be part of that," your doing will bring them together with you more than anything you could say to them.

So I thank you for your care, because underneath everything you said is a big heart. And now it's time to put it out there.

"Hi, Jack. Thank you so much for the teaching tonight. That was really beautiful. The peaceful heart really resonated. I'm very aware of this feeling of not doing enough right now. And I am someone who's very grateful that I am still working full time. I work in healthcare as a mental health provider, even seeing some people individually right now."

What you're doing is important—it's really needed right now.

"Yes. My question is—"

It's been partly really addressed when you were talking to the first responders—this question of how to hold the suffering of others when you're simultaneously feeling pretty stressed out yourself, as the acuity is just up for all of us right now.

What have you learned that helps you so far?

Sleep. Being in nature. Talking to people. And knowing that when I am with people, I am present.

Well, you've answered most of your own question. Sleep more, walk in nature, talk with people. And maybe some of those things that I mentioned for the first responders apply here too. Perhaps it's time to make your altar so that you don't carry it all in your body. Sweep through your body at the end of the day. Give it back to Mother Earth, or give it to Kuan Yin to carry. Do those things that nurture you.

You already know how to do this. You're in a tough birth process. Like a lot of people, as a first responder, you're right at the side of this birth happening. And so you do have to take care of yourself.

There's a famous story called the Bamboo Acrobats. It describes a traveling mini-circus that came through the villages. There was a father and a daughter—she would climb up a pole and do tricks while he carried this long bamboo pole. They had a disagreement and brought it to the Buddha. The father said, "I'll take care of you if you take care of me." And the daughter said, "No, no—I should take care of myself and you take care of yourself."

They went to the Buddha and asked, "Who's right?" He listened to them and said, "I hate to say it to you, dad, but actually your daughter is right—as is often the case." He explained that if she takes care of herself, she will also be protecting him. And if he takes care of himself, he will be protecting his daughter as well.

So there's something in what you say. You already know this—the nature, the sleep, the taking time. Maybe now you're adding some rituals and practices. Just know that you happen to be present at a time of messy birth, and you have to keep yourself properly cared for so that you can do this work well. And I thank you for that.

So my question is, how does white awakening work relate to or intersect with the Buddhist teachings?

What makes you ask?

The reason I'm asking is that I've heard a surprising number of harsh, unkind, and flat-out rude replies when I speak about doing white awakening classes or programs. And they were so profound for me personally. So it's interesting to take in that energy that comes, that feels very negative.

What do you do with that when people disparage it or are so negative?

Well, I notice my body, of course—almost instantly sort of like, wow. It makes me feel sad. And I feel an energy that arises, really wanting to convince them that they should take another look. I realize there's a passionate fire in that work, and it's been profound in my practice.

First, I'm just listening to you with a lot of respect for doing the work that you're describing, because it's the work that we all need to do. The Buddhist teachings primarily talk about the inherent dignity of every human being. The Buddha was very clear about this—in the racist caste system of India, he welcomed everybody to come and be respected, quite against the entire social structure of the time. There are teachings upon teachings about the value of every human being and treating each one with dignity. So you're doing that in this beautiful way.

And then what happens is this: as you wake up, you realize more and more clearly—in ways you may not have seen before—that society is so structured in ways that people are not only ignorant, but because of that ignorance, they're causing all kinds of suffering. And they don't even believe it or know it. It's woven in. You see all of that. And then when they say things like "Oh, that's a bad thing" or other negative dismissals, you feel it in your body. You feel sad. You feel it in your body.

Part of what happens in doing this work is that you enter the territory of suffering. You voluntarily do it and say, "All right, I'm going to open my heart and my mind to actually recognize and feel what oppression is like." I mean, what happens? You can walk down certain streets or in stores or go places and you can trust that you'll be accepted. But if you were brown or black or poor—a person of color from whatever background—you'd be seen with suspicion, or worse. You'd be tailed or pulled over or whatever. You know all this in some way.

So you begin to see the fabric of society and the suffering woven through it. But it's not enough to see it. If you're really engaged in some way, you also feel it. You can't not, because you're a human being. And then when you get dismissed by others for it, what you're experiencing is the pain that people have experienced for a really long time—every Black or brown or BIPOC person who spoke up and said something, every woman who spoke up and said something happened and people dismissed it or got angry. You're now party to that pain, and you can't really fix it.

But what you can do is see the fear that's behind it. Because all that reactivity, all the grasping, all the aggression—if you look underneath it, there's fear. And knowing that, you can hold them with some compassion, even in their ignorance. You're not going to

convince them with your words at all, but you'll convince them with your love. When you simply say, "I feel like I need to do this work because it's a work of love for me. It's a work of learning to love more fully. That's what I'm doing." How does that sound?

Another person asked about inclusion and invitation: How do we get the broader community involved in the dharma community? How do we become more inclusive of people of color, of those over 65, of the queer community? As a Latina lesbian, she was asking how leaders—both small and large—can become more inclusive.

First of all, I really appreciate both the genuineness of your question and your concern, your care. And also the fact that as a Latina and lesbian, you know what needs to happen in some way.

I'll tell you something. In the early 1990s—almost thirty years ago now—I taught my first day-long retreat for people of color in Oakland at Reverend E's Church, which was a Black church in Oakland, also a spiritualist church. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to bring teachings of loving-kindness, compassion, mindful self-awareness, how to steady the heart, to people in a community where there's been so much targeting by racism and injustice and poverty. Maybe this will be of value to them." That was my thought.

I was wrong.

In that room were fifty or sixty people, primarily Black and Latino, perhaps a few Asian Americans as well. Instead of all these beginners I thought I was going to introduce to the Dharma, it turned out almost all of them had long-term practices. They had been practicing yoga and meditation for years. And they said, "You know, I just don't go to those white centers. It doesn't feel comfortable for me. But actually, I've been doing this a long time." One man stood up and said, "I'm the only Black vegetarian Buddhist doctor that I know. And I feel like I've found my people."

So the first thing to say is that it's already there—in the LGBT community, in the Latino community, in the Black community. There are very deep spiritual traditions already part of those communities. And there's also tremendous interest in the inner life, expressed in different ways. This reframes things considerably. It doesn't have to be brought to these communities; rather, we want to celebrate what's already there and add to it, support it, make it more accessible.

The second thing I'd say, quite personally to you: if you have a group, it sounds like you're already teaching in some way. Put it out there, baby. Invite people and let it grow. I'm just thrilled that you're doing it. You have to find your own language and your own way that fits into the community you tend to.

I'll tell one more story. I was doing some peace work in Palestine and Israel, and I did a large benefit in Tel Aviv for mindfulness in Arabic. About a thousand people came, and we raised a good amount of money. I was talking to one of the first Arabic mindfulness teachers working in Palestine and Syria, and I said, "It's so beautiful—you're leading little retreats. It's almost like people can go out into the desert." I was thinking of forty days in the desert where you fast and receive visions. I said, "You can invite people to go out, like tradition has it, to listen in the wilderness and receive inspiration. That might be a beautiful fit for the culture."

She said, "No, no, no. That doesn't work at all. Going out into the desert alone—for people here, that's a punishment."

I asked, "Well, if that's not the right image, what is?"

She said, "The image is a walled garden—maybe a little oasis with a wall around it, fruit trees, flowing water. There's an inner walled garden you can enter that contains the fruits of the heart." And that was what she used in her teaching.

I tell this story partly in honor of the fact that you are translating these teachings into the community of people you know and love—the Latina community, the LGBT community. You will find the metaphor that brings a sweetness they already recognize. They'll say, "Oh yes, I know this." And you'll offer ways that help. I'm part of your cheering section. Thank you, Maria.

We need to take our pause now and just take a breath. I want to thank you all for the sincerity of your questions. In them, you could feel how much people care. People's voices revealed their longing to attend, to help, to serve, to be together in whatever ways we can. We feel it all the more acutely because we are isolated—but we're not completely isolated. We're not isolated in spirit, and we're not isolated because there are things we can do. As long as you have breath and goodwill and a good heart, there are beautiful things you can do.

So let's be quiet for just thirty seconds.

Trust your own caring heart. Trust the ancient story that tells of the goodness, the generosity, and the creativity of humanity—that it lives within you. The longing to make a difference in your life and the lives of others is real. And you will find your way.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 97

Suffering is Not the End of the Story

Jack Kornfield · 55 min

> *In this profound talk, Jack Kornfield addresses how we can live wisely amidst multiple crises—pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, and personal struggles. Drawing from the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, he emphasizes that while suffering (dukkha) is real and present, it represents only the beginning of the story, not its conclusion. The path to liberation includes wise effort, wise concentration (samādhi), and wise mindfulness—what Kornfield calls "mindful loving awareness."*
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> *Kornfield shares powerful stories illustrating transformation: the eradication of smallpox through dedicated effort, a physician discovering the hidden beauty in a difficult patient, and ordinary people finding courage in extraordinary circumstances. He references the Buddha's final teachings on what makes a society prosper—meeting in harmony, honoring wisdom, caring for the vulnerable, and respecting the sacred environment. These teachings remind us that awakening is not about transcending the world but discovering the mystery and liberation available in this very moment.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for meditation and daily life: how to hold the body's pain with spacious compassion, how to tend the heart's 10,000 joys and sorrows with gratitude, and how to recognize that our minds contain seeds of both confusion and wisdom—and we choose which to water. Kornfield invites practitioners to ask themselves: "What would love have me do today?" This question becomes the compass for engaged, compassionate action in a world that desperately needs our open hearts and clear seeing.*

I was very happy to meditate and to sit together with you. It's such a pleasure amidst all this chaotic and very difficult time. Because even as we take our seat to try to steady and calm ourselves, we're doing so in the middle of multiple crises. The crisis of the pandemic and all that's happening and how it's affecting so many around us. The economic crisis that it's highlighted and made worse. The crisis of racial injustice and economic injustice and the disparity in our culture and country and in the world between rich and poor. The climate crisis, which affects everyone and all creatures on the earth. Now living in California, added to it as if it's not enough, we have these vast forest fires that are part of the usual ecosystem but much larger than usual, partly fueled by climate change itself.

So the question for us—those of us of good hearts who come together with our good hearts, and many of you as meditators over the long time or relatively new—is how do we understand this? And how do we live wisely amidst these crises?

What I'd like to talk about tonight is that suffering is not the end of the story. The difficulty and suffering is part of what we experience, but it's not where the story goes. And more than anything in these teachings, I want them to be a reminder. It's not something you have to take notes about or take an exam at the end or get credits for. It's really an invitation to reflect yourself mindfully and to live as you listen to it just here and now, and sense what resonates in your own heart to be true. The rest you can let go.

When I say suffering is not the end of the story, I think of my very dear friend, epidemiologist and physician Larry Brilliant, who was on the teams in India that worked to eradicate smallpox from the world. With this pandemic, Larry has been very busy working with the head of the CDC and the head of WHO, bringing all that he's learned about pandemics and epidemiology. But back then, when he was working in the last countries, the last places where there was still smallpox in the world, struggling to complete this work, he acknowledged—as we might—that smallpox was one of the greatest forms of suffering that humanity has ever known. Somewhere between 300 and 500 million people died of smallpox in the 20th century alone. If we think of one or two million dying from the COVID pandemic, smallpox was 100 or 500 times as much. It was the leading cause of death. In many years, one third of the Japanese population died in one of the epidemics. Most of the Native Americans, who were unprepared for smallpox, died.

What Larry described was working from village to village with a team of 150,000 people around the world, who all had the leadership and dedication to realize that it was possible to not only stop, but to eradicate this pandemic. He was in a village in a remote place in Bangladesh and saw the last live case of smallpox on earth—Rahima Banu, a young girl in a Bangladesh village. They managed to vaccinate everyone in that village even though the villagers resisted and struggled against it, because it was their belief that smallpox was a punishment from God. They vaccinated them all. And Larry said, "I looked in the eyes of this young girl who was surviving her smallpox—only half of children did—and I realized I had seen the last case of a virus that was one of the worst on earth for five or ten thousand years of humanity." And he wept.

So suffering is not the end of the story. We can also be witness to the bravery and the possibilities of life. Larry has been working on the eradication of polio and all kinds of other human possibilities following smallpox. But for us, what's important is to understand how we move and navigate and live wisely amidst all these difficulties.

The Buddha taught in his very first teaching, the very first day, the famous Four Noble Truths of suffering and its causes—greed and hatred and ignorance. And then he talked about the liberation of nirvana that he had discovered, and invited those who listened to him to find the same liberation in their hearts. What's important to understand is that after attaining nirvana, the Buddha wandered on foot the dusty roads of India for 45 years, meeting people and saying, "This liberation of heart and mind is possible for you."

Often when we think of nirvana or liberation, we tend to think in transcendent terms. And they're true in a way and quite wonderful—samadhi, jhana states, states of expansion and bliss, dissolving the body into light. These are things that you can do in meditation, that I've learned to do in retreats with various teachers I've practiced with, states of expansiveness and bliss and well-being. But it turns out that there's no enlightened retirement. Even the Buddha had backaches and terrible conflicts in his community between people, and people who tried to kill him. Maybe that just comes with leadership. I don't know, especially with good leadership.

But what he had done was open to a freedom in the mystery of our human life. To say this is possible. This inner peace and well-being, this freedom—freedom from fear and confusion and from the small, separate sense of self, from grasping—this is possible for you.

And we all need this. I think of my dear colleague and friend Sylvia Boorstein, who tells this story when she teaches about her father, who I knew. She was close to him and loved him, and he was in his 90s, on his deathbed. He had cancer and was getting closer and closer to dying, almost dying. She was whispering in his ear, "Dear dad, let go into the light. Let go into the ocean of love that you are. Trust it. Release into it. Let go of this body"—all those beautiful teachings we have for the end of life.

And he opened his eyes. He couldn't quite raise his head, but he opened his eyes. He motioned Sylvia to come close so she could hear his weak voice. And he said, "Sylvia, it's not such a big deal."

She carries this with her, because yes, there's suffering—and that includes aging and death and illness.

These are part of the first noble truth of life, and there are causes for it—greed and hatred and ignorance, and the amount of clinging and attachment that we have. But they're not the end of the story. We usually focus on the suffering or get lost in it. We get caught in the reactivity, the greed, the fear. We dwell in it and we struggle. What are we going to do about it? And we believe it in some deep way.

What if there were another way?

Jerry Flagstead, a physician, describes his initial revulsion to a patient named Frank. Frank was an angry and obese homeless man who had diabetes, was unbathed, and had gangrene on his legs and many open sores. When he did not take his meds for his mental disorder, Frank would flail his arms and spew curses and epithets at all who were around him. Frank was admitted repeatedly to the hospital, and for Dr. Flagstead, Frank was a patient who was hard to love.

One day, Frank was brought into the Richmond Hospital with congestive heart failure. The diagnosis was serious, and Dr. Flagstead tended him as best as he could. Then twenty members of the Down Home Neighborhood Church, in whose basement shelter Frank sometimes slept, arrived. They brought flowers and homemade food. They chanted and sang hymns to Frank, creating a chorus of care and communion. When Dr. Flagstead returned to Frank's room after tending another patient on the ward, he saw that Frank was smiling, bathed in their love. And the doctor realized he had never really seen Frank at all.

What if there were another way to see, even amidst the suffering? To take a breath, to sense the vastness and mystery of life. As the Ojibwa say, "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

It is a mystery. We are all made of starlight. The earth and all that's on it came as a planet out of the explosions of the stars in the galaxies. And if you don't think that's a mystery, look at every green leaf, every tree and every blade of grass and every weed—all those green things which contain chlorophyll that you studied in your high school biology class. Here's the cool thing: these plants know how to turn light into sugar. Imagine that. Not only are you congealed stars, but the surface of the earth is covered with beings that know how to turn light into sugar, so that the plants and animals around them—all that feed off this life that streams from the sun—turn into sugar for us.

The point of liberation is not to transcend this world, to find some peaceful bliss, to run away to some cave. The point of liberation is to see the mystery that's here and now—the sense of the sacred, the immanence of life. Like the Buddha wandering the dusty roads of India, we discover that exactly where we are can also be the place of peace and nirvana, of wellbeing.

In the noble truths that were taught, there's suffering. There is, in life. These days, I don't think anybody can deny it. But it doesn't say that life *is* suffering. It says that life *has* suffering. And then it talks about the causes: greed, hatred, ignorance, fear. We don't have to look very far to see how it plays out in our lives, in our communities, and more sadly, in the body politic and in the actions of nations around the world.

But there's a third and fourth noble truth. There's an end to suffering, and a path to the end of it. This path includes wise effort—the effort not to be caught in greed and fear and confusion, but to step out of them, the sense that there's another way of being. And wise concentration—the way of steadying the heart, what we did as we sat together, finding ease with each breath. Not only do we not want to get caught, but we need to learn how to stay present so that we're not completely caught by each fear and confusion that comes by. And then wise mindfulness, which basically means mindful loving awareness that's not identified with each thing that comes and goes—that we become the loving witness, the loving awareness of vastness itself, that sees the world arise and pass as it does for us in this human incarnation, with a sense of spaciousness, not taking it so personally.

Here's another story for you. This is about Whitney, who was caught in the great troubles of her family. Her mother was scheduled for hip surgery. Her father was already suffering from a middle stage of Alzheimer's that the mother was taking care of. She wanted her parents to continue to live in the home where they'd been for years and where Whitney grew up. But as their disabilities got worse, it became clear that they had to move out. Her brothers wouldn't do it. They told Whitney—and this happens so often to the women in the family—"You go take care of it."

So she took leave from work and spent time with her parents to help them in the hospital and get ready. The home was in a shambles. Her father couldn't really care for himself. They had round-the-clock care, but they couldn't afford it for more than a short period of time. Everyone was stressed.

Whitney took a walk up the hillside she'd known since her childhood. She didn't want to lose this family home.

She wanted her parents to stay until the end. And she didn't want to lose her parents. She wept as she walked.

But when she reached the top of the hill, she sat quietly, calmed herself, and looked across the vast Midwestern fields stretching to the horizon. The sky was filled with cumulus clouds bringing shade to so many small houses clustered at the edge of town and beyond. Facing this unbounded vastness, she suddenly felt less alone. She could sense how everything had its rhythms—arriving and departing, flourishing and struggling, coming into being and fading away.

How many people, she wondered, are in the same predicament we are in right now?

As she breathed with more ease, her heart opened further. I'm not the only one with aging parents. It's part of the human journey. And as the space within her opened, she felt more trust. This is the vastness of mindful loving awareness that allows us to steady and quiet our bodies and hearts and minds, to hold a kind of tender and wise perspective—to become the witness, to see the dance of our life from a place of compassion and understanding and connection. She knew connection. She knew she wasn't the only one, that there were thousands of others who were attending their parents that day, and this day as well.

So how do we live in this? How do we live in our lives?

In the last teachings of the Buddha, there's a famous text which records the final year of his teachings. He speaks of a wise society. He says that if a society finds a way to meet in harmony, to discuss their lives in harmony with respect for one another, and to part in harmony, such a society will prosper and not decline. If a society finds ways to listen to the wisdom of the ages, of the elders and all those who've directed humankind toward their best evolution and highest possibility, they will prosper and not decline. If a society cares for the vulnerable among them—the women, the children, those who are sick—they will prosper and not decline. And if a society cares for the sacredness of the environment around them, they will prosper and not decline.

This is part of the teachings of wisdom, the teachings of the liberated heart. It is collective wisdom, because we are interdependent with the world around us.

When I drove down to Southern California yesterday, I left San Francisco, which was very smoky, and drove through the Central Valley to be with my beloved Trudy, my dear wife. The smoke filled the entire Central Valley all the way to the last little range of mountains at the Grapevine, just before you descend into Los Angeles. Almost the entire state, and the Northwest in Portland, covered with smoke from these huge, still-burning and growing fires.

It's really difficult. My daughter is married to a firefighter who's been out on the front lines. My grandson, who's about twenty months old, keeps saying to his mama, "Outside, outside," but they can't go. It's not healthy. They have air purifiers in the house. But then what about all the people who are losing their homes? What about all the children in homes where there aren't air purifiers? What about all the creatures of the forest who are fleeing the fires?

And what can we do? What can each of us do?

If you feel guilty, if you feel ashamed somehow that you're safe when others aren't, that you have privilege when others don't—that's not the answer. The truth is that whatever birth you've taken in this life as a human being, you've been given a particular assignment. And if you have privilege, that is your assignment: to use it, to treasure it, to value it, to respect it, and then to use it in your way to make life beautiful for yourself and others.

For me, I've been going out daily for the last two and a half months with a big sign that says "Time for Racial and Economic Justice—Black Lives Matter." As the cars go by, I stand in the median of a very busy intersection, where I don't see other people near me, and I have my mask on. Some people honk and cheer. Many are quiet. And then once in a while, the angry people go by and shout at me—"Asshole! All lives matter! Stupid asshole, get out of here!"—and worse things than that.

Then today, a car pulled up and someone asked, "Are you getting paid to do this?" I said, "No, I'm doing it because I care." They said, "That's a lie. They must be paying you." I just said, truthfully, "This matters to me, and anything else you might believe is just propaganda. Do you care about economic justice and racial justice? I do."

So I get all of those things—the coming and going, the praise and the blame.

I'm also involved in a project to bring together all the dharma teachers that I know, all the meditation teachers and yoga teachers, with a group called Yogis and Buddhists United, to help get out the vote across the country. Because there are tens of millions of meditation and yoga practitioners.

And if the teachers of these traditions say, here's how you register to vote, here's how you help register others to vote—because we're interdependent. Every breath you took as we meditated was a breath that's part of the climate change we share. Was the breath perhaps constricted by your mask because of the pandemic? Was the breath taken in the middle of our economic crisis? All of these things are interconnected.

And you are invited to steady your heart. You're invited to see it all with loving awareness, to remember that this loving awareness is who you are, and to find your way to respond.

Going back to the very earliest teachings of the Buddha, it's clear that there was no spiritual bypass to engagement with the world. He stood up against and acted against the racist caste system of India. He invited those who were the lowest caste—the ones who were shunned and pushed to the edges of the village and spat upon—and he said, "You can become monks and nuns in my order and live with dignity and nobility."

And then when the princes and princesses of the royal households came to ordain, because you had to bow to those who had ordained before you, the Buddha had set it up so that prince or princess had to get down and bow to the thief, to the untouchable, to the lowest caste, who would become a noble one wearing the robes of awakening. This goes back to the very beginning—that it's not caste or race or creed or gender or ability that makes you noble. As the Buddha said, not your birth, but that nobility is the nobility of heart, the dignity and compassion that you carry. That's what makes a noble being.

When I was teaching at Naropa Buddhist University in those first years, starting in 1974 and 1975 with Ram Dass and Chogyam Trungpa and two thousand students, it was really quite a wonderful Dharma festival. I remember being at one of our faculty meetings. A dear friend of mine, Mirabai Bush, who's close to Ram Dass and did some books together with him—a wonderful teacher—she was there, and what got brought up was the fact that women were not being treated as well as men on the faculty. I know you're shocked to hear this. They were being paid less, they had less power, they had less influence. Shocking, absolutely shocking.

The answer that was given when it was raised—and remember, this was the seventies, which had its own foment and ferment of feminism in a beautiful way—Chogyam Trungpa and the followers, the teachers, the faculty who were around him said, "In the Dharma, there is no man and no woman. In the Dharma, we are all equal. There's a oneness, and Dharma is beyond gender and beyond all these forms of discrimination. You're seeing it wrong."

Then I remember Mirabai standing up and saying, "I just need a little clarification here. If there's no gender in the Dharma, then why is it that the eighteen people who run this are all men and the women are all in the back of the bus? What does that mean?"

It was a beautiful moment because it was undeniable what was happening, even though they were trying to hide out and make a spiritual bypass about it all. We know better than that now, in all kinds of ways.

Dear ones, dear friends, you are invited to live from your wisdom. You're invited to a liberated heart. You've taken human incarnation, and who you are is consciousness itself—the vast consciousness that's born in particular ways into your body and another's body. But who you are is the field of consciousness itself, like starlight that makes all things visible. That too is held in the field of consciousness.

And out of consciousness, this mysterious universe has created a universe of duality—of light and dark, beginnings and endings, birth and death, joy and sorrow. Because in the oneness of consciousness, none of that exists. There's only openness and possibility and eternal, timeless peace. But for consciousness to manifest as a world and a universe, it has to divide itself and make a beginning and an end, form and light and dark.

This is what we get: justice and injustice, pleasure and pain. Take a look around. This is human incarnation as it is.

Glennon Doyle says, "You will never change the fact that being human is hard. So you must change your idea that it was ever supposed to be easy."

And here you are, born into the human realm—light and dark, pleasure and pain, birth and death, sickness and health. Sounds like a marriage vow, doesn't it? In sickness and health. This is your vow to become a human being. You're married to the human incarnation of your life. And this is it. It's what Oscar Wilde called the tainted glory of humanity.

To be liberated, to be wise and peaceful and free, is a great power. And the great power is not to be afraid of suffering. Because suffering is only the First Noble Truth.

Zen Master Rinzai says, "One who is wise can enter the realm of hungry ghosts and dumb animals without being molested by them, can go into the three deepest hells as if strolling through a fairground, can play about in the world of fire and water—fire without being burned, water without drowning." How is this so? Because the one with a liberated heart finds that there's nothing that they dislike. If you grasp after something sacred out there and dislike this very world, you will go on floating and sinking in the ocean of birth and death. Confusion arises with the grasping of the heart.

When the heart is still and you grasp after nothing and welcome all, why then need you fear anything?

Do not tire yourself grasping after anything at all. And quite naturally, of itself, you will live in the way.

I remember when I first went to the monastery of Ajahn Chah, my teacher, to live in the forest as a forest monk. I entered with my robe and my bowl. I'd been ordained in the village temple where I lived in the Peace Corps, so my friends could be part of that ordination. I entered and Ajahn Chah looked at me and said, "Welcome. You're welcome to this as a place of peace and a place of practice." I said thank you. And then he looked me in the eye and said, "I hope you're not afraid of suffering."

I was taken aback by that as his first statement. I said, "Why do you say that?" He smiled and said, "There are two kinds of suffering. The suffering that you run away from, that follows you everywhere. And the suffering that you're willing to turn and face—and only there can you find the liberation of the heart."

So when you sit and meditate, you find both the suffering, that part of the story, and the liberation from that suffering, the other part of the story. You sit with your body, and in this frail and strong and magnificent and difficult, hard to attain—as they say—human body and human form, you will feel everything. Pleasure and pain and tension and illness and well-being and strength. And you'll feel it as part of the body of the earth itself.

A story for you. The question is, with loving awareness, how do you touch this body? When you're there with pain or sickness in your own body or someone else's, or you're there with something beautiful happening in your body, how do you hold it and how do you touch it?

Frank Ostaseski, dear friend who helped to start the Zen Center Hospice, tells a story of a resident who was there in a great deal of pain, advanced cancer throughout his body. Frank thought learning meditation might help him. But the stomach cancer he had was so painful. Frank said, "Why don't you turn your kind attention to it and see if you can hold it in compassion." He tried to open to the sensations. It was just too intense for him. And he screamed, "I can't—it's too much. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts."

So Frank told him, "Okay, let's try something else," and put his own hand gently on the man's stomach and said, "How's that?" And the man said, "Oh, oh, it hurts too much. It hurts." And Frank said, "Let's try this," and he put his hands near the man's feet. The man said, "Ah, that's a little better." Then Frank moved up and put his hands a couple of feet above the man's body. And the man said, "Oh, that's lovely actually."

As Frank goes on, this was no magic, no special body work, no esoteric practice—just opening to more and more space. And after a few minutes, with a more relaxed face, the fellow said softly, "Oh, rest in love. Rest in love." After that, whenever he'd get in trouble with his pain, he'd push his morphine pump—which sometimes we might wish we had—and then just repeat to himself, "Rest in love. Rest in love."

This is the liberation of the body. How to be with this amazing human body with loving awareness.

And it's the same for liberation of the heart. The heart bears witness to and carries the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows. When you sit and get quiet, you feel your grief and all the things you've lost in the pandemic, the connections that you want to have, the economic problems, the worry, the care for others. The heart is carrying all of this—your longing and your hope and your love. What you want to do as you sit quietly is to say to your heart, "Thank you. Thank you for caring so much." And hold it all with compassion.

My dear colleague and friend Yvonne Rand, the great Zen teacher from San Francisco Zen Center, died this last week. There was sent around a beautiful picture of her close to death, with clear eyes and a beautiful face, getting ready for the end of her life. And underneath it, some of her last words. She said, "No form." You can hear her whispering it to her daughter. "No form." Zen, of course, is full of all kinds of forms—sit and bow and ring the bell. She said, "No form. Only a bow of thanks."

What last words to say? Only a bow of thanks. To bear witness with the heart to this mysterious moment—painful, glorious, beautiful, loving, joyful incarnation.

And then there's your mind. The body, not your mind. The mind, maybe. The heart—all held in loving awareness, only love. And then the mind, filled with stories and plans and fears and memories and judgments and hopes and creativity and imagining. And boy, do we believe those stories. But some of them are like assassins. You know that. Some of them are enlightening stories and some are darkening stories. There's every story. The mind has no pride. But depending on what we listen to and follow, everything follows from that. "Mind is the forerunner," says the Buddha, to our joy and our sorrow.

I think of the story that Sylvia Boorstein told me. She was teaching in New York and offering these same teachings of loving-kindness, and a person came up to her and said, "I have to tell you a story, Sylvia. I was mugged. I went out on a walk late at night, somewhere around the East Side. And this guy came up to me—his hair was disheveled, his face looked crazy, and he was carrying a gun. Some guy who knows what he was on,

probably high on some drug. This white guy who looked half homeless and half let out of a mental hospital. He held up the gun and said, 'Give me everything.' And I said, 'Here's what I have,' and I handed him my wallet. He said, 'Give me more. Give me your watch.' I took off my watch and gave it to him. Then he brandished the gun in a crazy way and said, 'I'm going to kill you.'

"I looked at him and said, 'You don't have to kill me. You don't have to shoot me. You've got so much. You've got a wallet—there's seven hundred dollars in there, credit cards. You've got my watch. It's a beautiful watch, an Omega, wonderful watch. You got so much. You did really good. You don't have to shoot.'

"And it stopped the man in his tracks. He looked at me: 'I don't have to shoot?'

"And I went on further. I said, 'No, you did good. You have to tell your friends how good you did. Just take this. You did good.'

"And the man muttered, 'I did good. I did good.' He put the gun down, turned around, and walked away."

Now that's a hell of a story, isn't it? I'm not sure I could do that, but there's something magnificent in it. Because we have all these stories that go through our mind about how it should be and who we are and who someone else is. And when we step out of those stories and can see whoever's in front of us—to see the secret beauty of that person too—to be able, as this fellow did, to say "you did good" in the midst of it all. An extraordinary thing. And yet we can do this.

The mind has a hundred channels. It has a fear channel and a hope channel and an economic channel—you know, it's got the Wall Street Journal in there even if you're not a money person. It does worry about money. And it has a relationship channel and this and that kind of channel. And with it comes all kinds of emotions that tag along. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the mind as being like a field of seeds—seeds of anger and fear and confusion, and seeds of love and understanding.

Which seeds will you water? Which will you believe?

The fear? The confusion? The anger? There's another possibility. The suffering is not the end of the story.

Trudy tells a story—she's writing a book of stories, having learned so many things in her life. A short story she tells is about her mom. Her mom had moved to LA and was in her mid-eighties, maybe eighty-five. Trudy was helping to take care of her mother and daughter when her daughter was about to give birth to the first grandchildren. She

went to see her mom one day and her mom said, "I walked a block and a half to go to the bank, and I walked in the bank"—it's kind of like the story I just told you—"and the bank was being robbed. There were two bank robbers in there with guns and everybody was on the floor. I walked right in and the guy looked at me and said, 'Lady, get down on the floor.' And I looked back at him and said, 'You've got to be kidding.' And I turned around and walked out of the bank."

Trudy said, "Mom, you know you could have gotten shot. What made you do that?" And she looked at her daughter and said, "Honey, if I got down on that floor, I don't know if I'd ever be able to get back up again."

There's something so beautiful, both practical and wise—we can choose. Just like Ajahn Chah when we were out on our alms round crossing those little dikes in the rice paddies, and he said to one of the monks or the group of monks with him, "See that big boulder over there? Is that heavy, monks?" Of course the wise monk said, "Yes, it is, master." And he smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up." We actually have a choice of what we pick up in our heart and mind, what we carry with us.

And the truth is that even in the course of this hour or so that we've spent together, there have been five billion acts of kindness—someone putting a cool wet cloth on the forehead of a person who's hot, parents cooking their favorite meal for a child, someone getting a drink for someone who's thirsty, respectfully opening a door for someone or stepping out of the way. And even stronger, when the mothers came out, as they did in Portland, as they did in Argentina against the military who'd taken over and disappeared so many people, there's a kind of power in the human heart.

My friend David Bornstein and his colleague Tina Rosenberg have a column in the New York Times called Fixes that's now grown to two hundred other newspapers and journalism organizations called the Solutions Network. Every thing they publish is a beautiful solution that people have found to a human problem—how to get water to remote villages in the desert, how to help crops when there's been a flood of insects or locusts, how to teach children to read in places where there haven't been teachers. They're all stories of triumph and possibility.

This is our possibility and our triumph. Where are we going after all? Where are you going? You know where you're going? Here. Here and now. Remember Ram Dass and his best-selling book from the 1960s called Be Here Now that helped to change the consciousness of the culture. He wrote, "Early in the journey, you wonder how long the journey will take and whether you will make it in this lifetime, your spiritual journey. And later you'll see that where you're going is here. And you will arrive now and know

that this is the place of liberation, the place of awakening." It's the place to learn to love, to fulfill who you really are. There's no other place but this moment, the reality of the present.

Spiritual life isn't about focusing on some other place or some goal that you're going to get, but to open. It's said that the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity—to quiet the mind and tend the heart and open to the mystery of life that we are a part of.

We've been through troubles before. For thousands of years, for generations before this, for thousands of generations. And we know how to do this.

We know that suffering is not the end of the story. And more than that, we must ask: What do we bring to the table of this world in this human incarnation? Do we bring our fear and confusion and contraction from separateness, which just adds to the depression of it all? Or in the midst of it, can we bring an open heart and a quality of love? Can we see that suffering is the beginning of the story and not the end?

When the Dalai Lama wakes in the middle of the night, he starts his morning prayers at three-thirty or four a.m.: *May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge to help all those cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp in the darkness. As long as earth and sky and galaxies exist, as a bodhisattva may I be this for all beings, until we all awaken together.*

And then the secret from Thomas Merton, which he told to a frustrated activist: Sometimes what you do works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it brings about its opposite. This is not given to you. What's given to you is your heart's best intention. As you understand this, you get less attached to the results. And more and more you act from the truth and the value and the rightness of the work itself.

So you plant seeds, or you plant the trees—like those that brought a Nobel Prize, fifty-one million trees planted in East Africa, starting one tree at a time. What do you bring to this world table, to this human incarnation? And with what spirit can you offer it?

So you sit, you quiet the mind. You tend the body and the heart in the midst of this human life. And you become, as Mary Oliver said, a bride married to amazement—to love it all.

I have a poem as a way to end, a recent poem from the poetry journal *Rattle*, entitled "The Fact":

That there's a snake tunneling through the grass doesn't make the parting of the blades any less beautiful. Many things are strange. For example, people yawn when other people yawn. It's contagious. But usually blush or look away when other people cry. All the heavy metal potheads from high school became bankers or lawyers, or in some cases, well-heeled preachers. Meanwhile, David Lee Roth, formerly of Van Halen, could show up at your door to set up your dish TV and you wouldn't even recognize him, now would you? Me, I've seen barbed wire rusting in brittle morning light. I felt a horse's nose wet under my hand and heard it snort like wind lapping a flag. Honest, I've heard a stadium exhale as a ball landed in a glove. And I spent the car ride home trying to find a way to describe that sound. I felt the sorrow in the heart of beauty and beauty inside sorrow. Beauty and sorrow have rubbed together like two sticks, blazed up and burned me. Speaking of the smoke signals made by beauty and sorrow talking over each other, I've heard people laugh when other people laugh. But it would be a lie to say I've never heard anyone laugh as someone cried. I need you to think of poetry as a beautiful lie that hits a bull's eye. I've gazed into a bull's eye, seen the fierce, wounded beauty there. I need you to know that the sky's tilting from the heaviness of all these southbound birds, but will right itself before you have a chance to fact check me on this.

I just love the playfulness of it. Many things are strange. For example, people yawn when other people yawn, but usually blush or look away when other people cry. We are in such a mystery. And I was, as Mary Oliver says of herself, a bride married to amazement.

And our task? To love it all—because this is the end of the story. The end of this story is the loving heart. This is who you are and this is what matters. And maybe the question: What would love have me do today?

What would love have me do today?

CHAPTER 98

Q and A: Suffering is Not the End of the Story | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 29 min

> *In this heartfelt Q&A session, Jack Kornfield engages directly with practitioners facing some of life's most persistent challenges: the spiritual loneliness of walking a contemplative path when others around us aren't connected to present-moment awareness, deep-seated feelings of unworthiness inherited from difficult family histories, maintaining hope during collective crisis, and supporting teenagers through the unprecedented difficulties of 2020.*
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> *Through gentle, embodied inquiry, Kornfield guides each questioner to locate their suffering in the body, hold it with compassion rather than trying to fix it, and discover what they already know to be true beneath the painful stories. Drawing on Viktor Frankl's insights from "Man's Search for Meaning," he explores how meaning-making and hope arise not from denial but from bearing witness to our broken hearts while recognizing we are part of a much bigger story. He recommends Mindful Self-Compassion training and Byron Katie's inquiry work for those struggling with persistent negative self-beliefs.*
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> *The teaching culminates in a beautiful reminder that our teenagers—carrying both tremendous vitality and genuine angst—are living through a collective initiation that will ultimately strengthen them. We don't need to fix their depression or preach solutions; we simply need to embody what we know: that no circumstance can take away the human spirit, that loving awareness is our true nature, and that suffering is never the end of the story.*

And take a breath and end the storytelling and the teachings. And for those who wish, we can do a little dialogue, the Q&A.

Hi there.

Hi there. Who's this?

My name is Brett.

Hi, Brett. Where are you?

I'm in the Bay Area, so I'm experiencing the smoke, although we have a little bit of clear skies at the moment, so we'll take what we can. I had sort of a two-part question. What strategies do you like to use or suggest to step out from the suffering or pain? And

second to that, while working on the here and now, how do you handle the loneliness that comes along with that practice where others around you are not connected to the here and now?

Beautiful deep questions. Let me start with loneliness, because you speak of a kind of spiritual loneliness when others around you aren't connected. What do you do with it? How do you handle it? What have you learned?

I just handle it, I guess, is the way that I do it. And I think second to that, I find that you look around you and children sort of get it—they're born with it, and adults kind of lose it. So maybe I intellectually process what's actually happening to deal with the loneliness, as opposed to trying to fight it. But I'm always looking for different perspectives.

First, I love your answer, and I can see—however old you are—your children and mine. I remember when my daughter was really little and I would take her around and introduce her. "This is an oak tree, and this is the fence, and that's the moon." We were walking one day around the block. She could speak then; she was like two, two and a half. And she said, "Daddy, the moon is following us. How can it do that?" Whoa, she's right. Wherever I went, it was following me.

So I love that you said that. You're kind of reminding everyone that we have within us that original child of the spirit, that innocence. So you look for the reminders, and then they're right there with you, and then you handle it.

I'd like to rephrase it, because loneliness is part of being human. I don't know anybody who hasn't experienced it. I'm a twin. Loneliness has been a hard thing for me. I used to say to my twin brother, "I think I was born as a twin because I didn't want to be lonely." You know, I get married and then I wouldn't feel lonely. It was a good idea, but it's not true, because it's a part of being human.

So then handling it, to me, means acknowledging it—not trying to fix it but holding it with compassion and saying, "Yes, we are born in this mystery of being separate and yet connected." It's like light: it's a wave and a particle. As a wave, it's everything. As a particle, it acts as if it's separate, but we know it's not true. And so we have to bear our loneliness.

I'd ask: where do you carry it in your body, if we were to practice together? What stories does it tell? "It should go away. If you were a better practitioner, you wouldn't feel it." You can listen to its stories. You can feel it in your heart or your gut. You can say,

"Yeah, thank you for telling me this story. I'm actually okay now. I can feel the loneliness, and I feel how many people are lonely." That's just part of being human. And I'm going to love in the midst of it anyway.

How's this working for you?

Makes sense. I agree.

So one more minute. Close your eyes for a second and feel where in your body you sense the loneliness, if it had a center. And with your eyes closed, just tell me.

Probably in the belly.

Feel that in the middle of solar plexus and belly. Feel what it's like. What's it like? A bit uncomfortable, tight, however you feel it.

And now imagine that you could hold it with compassion or loving kindness, loving awareness—not trying to fix it or make it go away. In fact, you can let it open more and just hold this part of your humanity with great kindness and tenderness. Notice what happens. What happened to it?

It certainly relaxed a little bit.

Relaxed a little. The last thing I was going to suggest is I want you to imagine your children coming and tickling you while you're feeling so lonely right now. Just picture it. And it's like they're saying, "Dad, that's not the end of the story, that loneliness. Yes, it's there, but here, I'm going to tickle my father." And so you have all this. You already know it when you spoke of it.

Thank you.

Thank you. All right. Enjoy your loneliness and your kids and the breath of fresh air that's come.

My name is Scott, and I'm in Chicago. I come from a really painful family of origin, and even as I've created a loving family of my own, I carry with me what my therapist so nicely termed actually today a "core negative belief" about myself. You've written really wonderfully and beautifully about this. How do you suggest working with these persistent feelings of unworthiness?

Hmm. So I have to ask you, what has helped you a bit, even if it's not enough?

I went through a really tough time this year. The first level was just realizing that those negative emotions weren't going to destroy me and that I could bear them and sit with them and breathe through them. And now things have turned to more personally happy times, and it's surprising that it can follow me even into joy—that leads to a feeling that it's not real or not deserved. I think I set up a lot of defenses, like I have to achieve my way out of it, care for patients, make a good dinner. And who am I without all of that too?

Already it sounds like there's been some wisdom that's come in and some love for yourself. There's more joy and less being caught or believing the negative beliefs, but they're still there and you kind of wish they'd go away, but they're part of your inheritance. Having come from a pretty terrible family myself, we get bequeathed these things from our family and they're there.

Your question has a lot of intelligence in it: how do we deal with it? You've learned so far how to be with it without letting it destroy you, how to tolerate it. Of course we could do what I just did with Brett and ask you where you feel it in your body and how you're holding it—those would be good practices.

I'm going to give you a couple other suggestions. One is that there is an eight-week online training program called Mindful Self-Compassion taught by Chris Germer from Harvard and Kristin Neff. It's really good. And I know you're busy and it sounds like you have a family, but it would be quite worthwhile.

Her workbook is right behind me. Have you done it?

I'm in the middle, yeah.

Good, so that's one thing. Because it's just common humanity. Not all of us, but of those cars going by either putting their hands up or shouting at me, a lot of them had bad families. And we can liberate ourselves from them. So mindful self-compassion. There's also the work of Byron Katie.

And she really does these beautiful practices of questioning your thoughts, because part of what you're describing is a program of thought that's inside you. I would listen to her online, have her do some of her practices. But even if you close your eyes for just a second—we won't do a whole thing—but if those negative beliefs about yourself arise, that you're not doing enough, you're not good, you're not right, I don't know what they tell you, but things like that. And you hear those thoughts.

What's one of the thoughts that comes to you with your eyes closed? A troubling one.

"The hardest one is to believe that I'm worthy of love."

Right. So the thought says you're not really worthy of love. That's the thought. Now you feel it, you sense it in your body, and it's painful. It hurts.

Now I'd like to invite you to open your eyes and to look into my eyes, even through that screen. And I just have a question to ask you, my friend. Is it true? Is it true that you're unworthy of love? Are you certain?

"Yes."

I want you to keep looking at me because that's part of what makes it hard and real. Is it true?

"No."

Are you certain it's not true? Feel that. There's a story that was programmed in there, but what you're answering me—no, it's not true. Are you certain? You're telling me you already know this. As much as you love your children and you see their beauty, something in you knows this is true. And that is what you can trust.

When you practice or meditate or do your work and those thoughts come, you can acknowledge them. "All right, this is a painful thought, a painful belief." And then you can say to yourself, "Is it true?" And remember this moment. It's so clear—you know it's not true, and you're certain of it. How does this feel?

"It feels great."

What kind of work do you do? Are you a first responder?

"I'm a neurologist."

So you have a lot on your plate to tend to all these people. I love the fact that you're doing it, that you've made a good family. You look like a really great guy. I'm going to say, you know, you're totally worthy of love. Totally.

"Thank you."

Let's try another.

"Hi, this is Eliani."

Hi, Eliani. Where are you?

"I'm in Sonoma County."

Oh, my God. How's the smoke there?

"Well, actually today was not terrific, but right now it's clear. Beautiful night."

And I have a question about hope. I recently started reading a book that I had been meaning to read forever, and I finally picked it up—it's Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

I had just barely started reading it, and I was struck by how Frankl described the people who survived—they were the ones who gave their suffering meaning. And from that meaning arose this sense of hope. People were living for something, whether it was returning to a family or whatever it was, but they had hope.

And I'm very aware, having just watched Barack Obama speak, that his presentation was simultaneously what Maureen Dowd characterized as an "in case of emergency break this glass" moment, and at the same time it was filled with hope. You referenced it tonight in a way that I heard as having more to do with story than with power. You referenced the hope channel. So I guess I would just love to hear how hope fits.

I have hope. I have a lot of hope.

What hope do you have?

Oh, gosh. I guess that there could be less suffering in the world. When I drive by the animals—all the cows and the horses and the goats—they're breathing what we don't have to breathe because we live in houses. And the people who've lost homes, sometimes twice over. I have hope that we can bring decency—that's a word that's used so much now—bring decency back into our government. I have a lot of hope that we as humanity will find the goodness that we are, the beauty that we are, the love that we are. You talk about the vastness, that we can wake up. We as humanity can wake up to that vastness. So I have a lot of hope about that.

Well, when I asked you, what do you have hope for, and you said, "I have hope"—I could also feel, as you spoke, almost as if there were some tears along with that hope. Both were true. I could tune into that. And I think that's part of what hope is. Hope is not a denial. What Viktor Frankl writes about is that you actually feel your broken heart, that you feel the tears and the tenderness. And you also understand that there is a bigger story than this. The bigger story is mothers who pick up cars off of children. The bigger story is mothers who marched in Argentina. The bigger story is that young people are standing up for climate change and will continue to do so, whatever anybody says. But they do it through their tears, and through your tears.

And that's really where the power lies—to not turn away. Just what you're doing: to be willing to see it, to bear witness to it with a big heart, with compassion and awareness. And then to say, "Yes, and we'll pick the car up. Yes, we will do this"—even amidst the tears. I feel both of them in you, and just offer you a kind of mirror of respect for that which you carry.

Thank you.

One or two more questions.

Hello. I'm Lisa, in Berkeley.

I have to say, in some ways I feel like just being here and hearing your last few answers, you've almost already answered the question. It really has more to do with the state that I experience myself in. My question may be an extension of Brett's about teenagers. I used to do retreat practice, and then I became a mother, and now I'm on the eighteen-year parenting retreat. I have about five more years to go on that part of it. And I just see how teenagers are really suffering right now in shelter-in-place particularly, and also with all the different facets of the pandemic—especially with the isolation and the turning towards screens and technology as a way to cope. Even those who have been lucky enough to be raised with mindfulness are not necessarily drawn to it, and are even averse to it.

I'm wondering, what's your advice for taking care of our teens in this time? And you talked about liberation. So I thought I'd add to that. What would you say for parents who are trying to liberate while sheltering a teen?

Well, for one thing, teens are carrying this amazing energy. They're just so full of energy and vitality and life and rebellion, seeing the world fresh and going, "Oh my God, look at what we're inheriting." If you're able to see through their eyes, which you probably can as a mom who's tuned in, they carry tremendous gifts. They also carry a lot of angst. And anybody who's been a teenager can remember the angst you had. I don't think our job as parents is to fix that. We want to—as a mom and dad, we want to keep them happy and well and growing. But here's the truth: these are teenagers who've gone through 2020. They haven't finished it yet, but they're going to be the generation of 2020 who lived through this pandemic. It's like people who lived in New York City during 9/11—it became part of their life, became part of their DNA.

Your teens and our teens and our children are going to be the generation that lived through this. And it's going to terrify them and they'll lose their friends. But it's also going to make them alive and strong, because they will get through it. And you don't have to do much, I assure you. They're looking and learning all the time. You have to love

them. If they want to spend a lot of time on the screen, so what? You don't have to fix them. They're looking at the world, and that's how they'll find their way to come through it. You can give them suggestions, but you can also see and let them know that they're actually going through this collective human initiation, that it's their generation, and out of it they're going to learn things that no one's ever learned in quite the same way.

How does this sit when I say this to you?

Ninety percent true. And then the depression piece is the ten percent that says, "But..."

Whose depression? Yours or theirs?

Theirs. But it could be—it's hard.

Okay, so close your eyes for just a moment. And there they are. And you're being honest and you say, "When I meditate, when I get quiet, I feel how hard this is for myself. I can get depressed because we've lost this and this and this." So you name it. And you say, "And here's how I deal with it. I realize that we're part of some much bigger story, and that this is going to be a year that we'll struggle to get through and remember." What would you say to them, honestly, when you speak from your own depression? And how would they respond? You're vulnerable and they are.

I would say, "I don't want you to lose hope."

You could say that. You could also say—I'm just going to feed you a different line. I hear that and it's beautiful. It's the mother's wish for them. But you can say, "I don't lose hope. I live in this and I've seen it." This is more Viktor Frankl. "I've seen something different. You may feel hopeless, and that's part of what's there for you as a teen to live through. But it's not the end of the story." And you don't have to want anything for them. You just have to tell them what you know. What do you know that's true?

Is 2020 the end of the story? You sure? No. Is it hopeless?

There's a difference between that emotion of feeling hopeless, which you can acknowledge—you feel hopeless or you feel despair or you feel confused or all of those things. Those are emotions. They come when things are so uncertain. But then some deeper part of your heart, when I ask you, is it hopeless? You can't say it is because you know that it's not. You know that human beings are bigger than this, that life is bigger than this.

Close your eyes again and just feel the truth of this. And imagine—you don't have to be the preacher to your teenagers. They love that, you know how much. But you can be somebody who says, "This is what I carry. Sure, I've felt this stuff, and I can see it around because you pick it up." And just what you said to me—no, I know something. I know that we'll get through this. I actually know that we're going somewhere else. Really feel that. And then you love them. You say, "It's okay. You can feel everything."

You become that one on the boat that Thich Nhat Hanh talks about. You know that story—when everyone panics. Well, the teenagers on the boat are panicking. And you say, "Yeah, we've been through storms and pirates. We know how to do this. It's not the end." And it's not. They're the ones that will make the difference.

I want to pause at this point with everyone, because I feel my heart really full from all the honesty and love that came through these questions. How do we love ourselves when our family taught us not to? How do we get in touch with that which we know to be true, no matter what happens?

What Viktor Frankl found, even through the worst, is that there's something in the human spirit. He said the thing he discovered at the bottom of it all is that no matter what the circumstances are, how difficult—in the end, the gift is this: that no one can take the human spirit away from you. No one. And underneath it all, this is what our humanity asks for. This is what we carry in some really deep way.

I think teenagers are the best. And the fact that they're difficult and rebellious and stuff like that—hallelujah, baby. They're carrying something the world needs. They are. And they get depressed? Yeah, you've got reason to be depressed.

You're living through a tough one, but that's what teenagers are supposed to do. And we know you can do it. You do know it. So thank them.

And thank you all. I'm really grateful for this chance to be with you, this chance to meditate and practice together and to teach.

I just wish you all to find your ways to know that who you are is loving awareness itself—that you can rest in loving awareness, that you can be loving awareness, that this is your true nature. And as you navigate through human incarnation, this wild time especially now, may it call on you to find those deep truths that you know, which have been given voice by so many of you tonight.

So thank you. Let's just be quiet for thirty seconds.

May we all awaken together. Awaken the great heart of compassion and the wisdom of loving awareness—our true nature, our hope.

Thank you all, and good night.

CHAPTER 99

Wonder, Mystery, Awe, Gratitude

Jack Kornfield · 50 min

> *In this heartfelt Thanksgiving-season talk, Jack Kornfield invites us to navigate life's paradoxes—political confusion, social challenges, family complexities, and historical injustices—through the lens of wonder, mystery, awe, and gratitude. Drawing from Mary Oliver's poetry, Native American wisdom traditions, and the Buddhist understanding of dukkha (suffering), he explores how attention itself becomes a sacred gift that transforms our experience.*
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> *Kornfield shares powerful stories including his encounter with Iroquois medicine man Mad Bear, whose 45-minute prayer of gratitude revealed the interconnected web of existence, and his wife Trudy's profound experience of seeing the divine in hospital workers during their daughter's medical crisis. He reflects on how sitting practice reveals our identification with personality and doing, while pointing us toward the vast, indestructible awareness that is our true nature.*
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> *The talk addresses how initiations and difficulties serve as doorways to discovering what cannot be destroyed within us. Referencing Carl Friedrich Dürckheim's teaching on finding the indestructible through exposure to annihilation, and Thomas Merton's transformative encounter with the Buddha statues at Polonnaruwa, Kornfield reminds us that we have been training for difficult times through countless generations. He concludes with the Buddha's teaching on becoming "patient as the earth, unmoved by fires of anger or fear," inviting listeners to recognize themselves as loving awareness itself—the consciousness that witnesses aging without being aged, that holds all experience with compassion and gratitude.*

When I ring the bell, I realize I miss ringing that great big bell at Spirit Rock on Monday night that calls everybody together. It's one of my favorite things to hit that huge bowl bell and have it resonate for so many people. But I'm hoping the meditation had some resonance for you. In the dialogue afterward, I'll get a sense of whether this was valuable or not, whether that kind of envisioning in that form of compassion and loving kindness worked for you. I hope so, in some way.

I invite you to listen, not so much to be taught—spare you that—but at best to be reminded of something that you already know, or to reflect in some way on what matters. And to reflect on what are the teachings of wisdom or understanding that can help us, especially in this kind of wild time.

Here we are, post-election, or semi-post-election, it looks like, and I have this feeling it's like a Greek play. I can't tell whether it's a comedy or a tragedy. There's the Greek chorus singing in the wings, all of the different social media adding their voices to it. For some, it looks like it's playing out as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described with denial, anger, and bargaining—all of that going on, wherever you are. It's a really confusing time.

And then here we are, Thanksgiving week, the big harvest festival. We're about to go into the so-called holiday, holy day season and the winter solstice. But it's all confusing. And it's all made of these paradoxes that aren't easily solved.

Here we are in our politics these days. Are we supposed to be taking care of ourselves? Should we leave the international world? Should we interact with it more fully and take care of it? Here we are, social beings. But if you are among the 50 million people who watched that movie, The Social Dilemma, which talked about the problems with technology, we have the blessings of Zoom and all the great things from technology—and all the problems that it creates for teenage girls looking at their bodies through the magnifying toxic influence of social media, or the misuse of it politically.

And then we have our families, which are a source of both joy and blessing and trouble. Since Jesus and Buddha had trouble with their families, you know it's just part of being human. And that's how it is. Love and difficulty.

Maybe you're creative and you're an artist. But is it a society that even supports artists? What's your role? The individual, the collective. We're supposed to be in the land of the free. But what does that mean? What is freedom?

Nelson Mandela, when he got out of 27 years in Robben Island prison and stood up in front of the new nation, the re-made nation of South Africa with such magnanimity and graciousness and wisdom—he spoke of freedom. He said, "You are not yet free," when he looked at everyone there. He said, "You merely have the freedom to be free." Kind of an amazing statement. You are not yet free. You merely have the freedom to be free, to take that freedom and do what you will with it.

Here we are in a time that's crying for racial and social justice. You see those statues of the goddess Justice holding the scales with a blindfold on, to be blind. But now there's another meaning for that blindness of justice—to not see, and have been blind for years, decades, maybe centuries to the injustice built into the very system that she serves.

What do we do with all this? How do we navigate the blessings, the paradoxes, the difficulties of it?

When I was in elementary school, 65 or 70 years ago, they taught us about Thanksgiving and we made those turkeys that you cut out like your hand. They gave us the childhood story of how the good pilgrims and the good Indians came together and ate turkey—that mythological story for our harvest festival. And yet we know, honestly, when we look at the genocide of the Native Americans, of the First Nations, that was really woven into that story. What happened to them at the hands of those who came from Europe to conquer, and in most cases to kill. And yet what we've lost—their wisdom of the land and the environment and the animals and the plants and the wisdom of community that the Iroquois nation bequeathed to the framers of the Constitution.

So how do we navigate all of this?

The gratitude of Thanksgiving. I'm just thankful that it's a holiday where we don't give presents. We don't have to go shopping for Thanksgiving. And yet the tragedy that's woven into it.

I would suggest some words for us: wonder, mystery, awe, gratitude.

Let me read you a poem from Mary Oliver, one of our great dharma poet laureates.

This morning, two mockingbirds in the green field were spinning and tossing the white ribbons of their songs into the air, and I had nothing better to do than listen. I mean this seriously.

In Greece, a long time ago, an old couple opened their door to two strangers who were, it soon appeared, not men at all, but gods. It's my favorite story—how the old couple had almost nothing to give but their willingness to be attentive. And for this alone the gods loved them and blessed them.

When they rose out of their mortal bodies like a million particles of water from a fountain, the light swept into all the corners of the cottage, and the old couple, shaken with understanding, bowed down. But still they asked for nothing but the difficult life which they had already. And the gods smiled as they vanished, clapping their great wings.

Whatever it was I was supposed to be this morning, whatever it was I said I would be doing, I was standing at the edge of the field. I was hurrying through my own soul, opening the doors. I was leaning out. I was listening.

She writes about that story, I think it's from Ovid, of Baucis and Philemon, the two in that cottage, and how they were blessed in a different way by the gods. But they were blessed because they gave this extraordinary gift. The gods apparently had gone to many other houses—you know how these myths work—in the form of asking for food,

asking for something, to be taken care of, and they were turned away. Then finally at this door, this old couple welcomed them. They became, like Rumi wrote in that poem you all know so well, they became the guest house to welcome each visitor. And they offered what Mary Oliver describes as the great gift, which is the gift of attention.

When somebody asks for a little attention, it's actually not a small thing. It's what makes the gods smile. When we're actually able to pay attention in that way, it lets us see something entirely different.

When my beloved Trudy was young—she told this story when we were teaching together the other day—when she was a young mother and her daughter was two and a half years old, she was living in Geneva near her parents. Her dad worked for the WHO as one of their top doctors for the health of the world. Her daughter got very sick with the most virulent form of meningitis and went into a coma, if you can imagine, and was in the hospital for almost two months.

Toward the end of that time, when it got as bad as it got, she coded. Which simply means that everybody has to rush to the side of that person because they're not sure they'll make it. Trudy described sitting there with this little body of her daughter that she'd been sitting with for weeks, living on a cot next to her in that hospital, praying, worried the way only a mother could.

She said, "I saw all these people—the nurses and the doctors and the people trying to put needles into her tiny little veins. And then all of a sudden, the room filled with light, like that cottage." She said, "And I, who never really thought about God or what God was—I saw God. And it was those nurses. Those doctors. Those people at the bedside."

Even as we speak, there are hundreds of thousands of acts of generosity and goodness, billions of them around the world, where we are tending one another as human beings.

As a monk, every morning when we would come into the dharma hall, still in the dark before dawn, and light candles and do our morning chanting, part of the chants were a blessing chant of thanks and gratitude for the food we had, for the garments we were given to wear, for the shelter of our place, for the community around us—that we might remember every day this gratitude. And then we might set our intention and dedicate ourselves from all that's been given. Part of these chants were really a reflection to sense that we are part of a deeper order of things.

Doris was a fifty-something single mom with three teenagers and a budding career, but she was plagued with anxiety. One of her daughter's best friends had committed suicide. Another was struggling with her sexual identity. She, as a mother, was full of worry, full of fears and indecision and panic. She said, "When I learned about mindfulness, it touched me. It made sense, so I went on a retreat."

The silence and the peace were blissful. I think about that—leaving the three teenagers and going off on retreat. Ah, thank you. No decisions to make, only to be present and kind to myself.

What came first was a subtle change in the perception of who I am. I realized my heart had atrophied, and I'd held a lot of fear and pain inside, which prevented me from giving love to myself and others. I practiced a gentle acceptance of aspects of myself that I'd rejected and now felt grateful to know. This gentle opening over the days left me less caught in suffering. I began to trust myself, being fallible and human, and yet so much more.

Then what I call the little miracle happened. I was on a slow, mindful walk, totally quiet. And then I disappeared. There was no one—only vast silence and the wind. It became a day of joyful, amazing freedom. And now I know that I'm so much bigger than my fears. Some days I can still feel that vast expanse. And others, I'm still standing on the sidelines. But all I have to do is unfold my arms and step forward into life, and I'm free again.

In a moment, we can shift our identity and step out of what's called the body of fear. We can release what we've carried—we can be so loyal to our suffering—and become something bigger.

Many years ago, in the late seventies, I was invited to the Menninger Foundation. One portion of the Menninger Foundation was a group that was studying altered consciousness and unusual phenomena. And of course, they invited me—you know, that's how it works. It was all the meditation people and the shamans and that sort of thing. We had our conference and sharing and all the things you would expect in such a gathering.

One of the people there was a man named Mad Bear, an Iroquois medicine man. We were each invited to give teachings. I offered a talk and guided meditation. But Mad Bear said, "I can't give teachings in here. Come with me."

He led us out the door to the outdoors of Kansas—huge skies and fields of corn, vast vistas. We stood there in a rough circle in the fields nearby. And then he began to make a prayer.

My goodness, he went on for a long time, that prayer. I kept thinking, when is he going to finish? He's praying and praying. It went on and on, for perhaps forty-five minutes. But as I stayed with it and listened, I began to feel something so different. It wasn't a prayer—it was his gratitude. Gratitude for the people and the animals and the plants and the insects, for the creatures of the sky and the sea, for the air and the water, the fire and the earth, and all their joyful exertions that bless us every day. He gave gratitude to the care and labor of a thousand generations of ancestors and elders that came before us on that land and other lands across the earth. Gratitude for our safety and well-being and whatever health we have. Gratitude for our friends and family and community.

And then he became very particular, and he went down to the earth. Gratitude for Mother Earth for holding us so we don't fly off into space. Gratitude for that which lives within Mother Earth—for the web of life under the soil, the worms and the rhizomes, the wood wide web of the trees sending their sugar to their offspring and to the other trees, which we now know about. Gratitude to the birds—oh, he did the little birds first, those that would come near, and then the great birds. Gratitude for the animals of that land, for the buffalo that were still there in our imagination, even when we couldn't see them. Gratitude for the clouds and the sunlight.

By the time he was done, it was as if he'd offered this long practice of loving-kindness and mindfulness and mystery of this earth. We all went back inside slightly altered and happier than when we'd walked out, connected with one another.

The unseen world.

My dear friend Sylvia Boorstein, colleague at Spirit Rock, said that her main practice at one point had become simply saying thank you. To whatever arose, thank you. Thank you, like the poet says, thank you, dark though it is.

I sat with her when she told me that, and I challenged her. I said, "Thank you to everything?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Sylvia, how about the Holocaust?" Because she had lost family in the Holocaust. She got very quiet. She looked up and she said, "No thank you."

And there was something wise in that. It even had a thank you there.

Your gratitude grows. In Tibet, in Vajrayana practice, you pray for suffering. Grant that I may have enough suffering that my cold or defended or frightened or shamed or grieving heart can become the great heart of compassion. Gratitude for our tears, a kind of humility and grace.

I think about the movie of John Lewis, the great elder who recently passed, who worked tirelessly for racial justice. The title of the movie, he called it *Good Trouble*. And I think that's what the Tibetans pray for. May I be given good trouble.

And I found when I sat last week, as I do each time and get quieter, that my own personal tears became, after a while, what's called the tears of the way. Not the tears because we've had our own personal griefs and losses—which I have had, and so have you—but the tears that connect us.

And so there I was. I have a tiny little writer's cottage hidden up in the trees above Spirit Rock. Fortunately it has a heater and running water, so I can stay there. And it was wonderful to be there. And my mind started to get a little bit quiet, and I got a bit more aware. And as I would get quiet, I would also see my personality kick in.

When I was first in the Peace Corps, learning, getting prepared to work on these tropical medical teams in the Mekong River Valley, they gave all of us a Thai name as I was learning to speak Thai. And these teachers looked at me and they called me Mr. Doing, because I was always doing something.

And so there I was sitting, feeling loving kindness and vastness, and my mind would kick in. And it had ideas and plans and things that I'm going to do. I'm on these boards, you know, I'm working for immigrant rights and I'm on a board for this huge climate change thing, and I'm involved in a project that's trying to change the way technology is working in a healthy way—all these kinds of things. Mr. Doing.

And then I just had to say, oh, there he is. There's Jack. Kind of bow and say, yeah, he's done some pretty good things, but that's not who I really am. But it's nice. I get this incarnation. It's actually a pretty blessed one. I get to do some good things. But I need to hold it all.

And as I let myself quiet, then actually deeper tears came, and they weren't about me. They were for the friends whose child died of an overdose. And the people I know in communities of color that have been hit so hard by COVID.

And the tears for the loss of the rainforests.

And then one day a peacock came. I hadn't seen peacocks at Spirit Rock until this year, but I guess once we got out of the way, they decided they were going to come and visit. It came right up to my cabin and kind of pecked on the door a little bit while I was sitting. I said, thank you. Thank you for the marvelous visit.

And little by little, there was a shift—not only holding the mind, which does its thing, and the personality, the body. My body was tenser than I'd remembered or felt when I got there. But when I sat still, it reminded me, and gradually it unwound. And mostly there was just a shift, not just of a vastness, but also a shift of love. That all of it was fine. That all of it was intended—as a human being—to be part of our incarnation in some way, to be held with understanding.

Dear friends, the Buddhist texts begin, "O nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are. Do not forget your true nature."

And so we have these practices. You have them. I have them. We share them. And they open us to our true nature. They open the heart to hold the entire world with mindful loving awareness and compassion.

And of course all these studies—the eight thousand papers and studies from the neuroscientists of the last few decades on these trainings—they explain, as my friend Dan Siegel the neuroscientist calls it, that one of the gifts is expanding the window of tolerance. Like Rumi's guest house again, learning to treat each guest honorably, to receive what life offers us with some sense of gratitude.

Here's the deal. You got a human incarnation, like me. It will include majestic suffering. "Overcome all bitterness because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you," said the Sufis. Like the mother of the world who carries a certain measure of that cosmic pain in your heart, you're called upon to meet it in compassion and not self-pity.

And it has to be this way. If there's birth, there has to be death. If there's light, there's also dark. If there's a beginning, there's an end. If there's gain, there's loss. This is called duality. This is incarnation—pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, praise and blame. It's what we are. It's what manifests out of nothing into a world of form and emptiness.

Trouble? Somebody asked Zorba. "Life is trouble," he said. This is the first noble truth of the Buddha. You can't avoid suffering. This is dukkha, this is suffering. But suffering is not the end of the story. This we know too.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an Army veteran. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see he had tried to wash up before coming to the social services department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. Though he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores.

I wanted to get him into rehab, and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets.

"No, ma'am," he said. "All I'd like is a few dollars, some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town."

That shelter had fifty beds—cots really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds and nearly a thousand homeless just in this part of the city.

Winters here in Northern California mean cold, rain, and mud. Even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrated everything. His clothes and the bedroll he placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of the book he carried were swollen.

I asked him how many times he had tried rehab. "Two or three," he said. "Long time ago." Maybe it's time to try again, I suggested. I explained I'd had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. Besides, I said, we're months away from warmer weather. What else have you got going on?

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eyes, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard—impossibly hard—so he was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone. "Shall I?" I asked. He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left. I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors, and holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

With your own good hearts, you are asked to learn to trust, to do what Martin Luther King Jr. said: to turn the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

In traditional cultures, this trust is learned through initiation. It's part of every wise and traditional culture—deliberate initiations of facing danger or death in some way to find something deeper. You all know the stories of the Maasai sending a young man out with a spear to kill his first lion and come back acclaimed in the village as a man. The Mayans had these amazing initiations for men and women. The boys who were sent out—one of the tasks they had was to come back into the village and steal the grandmother's cooking pot. And the women in the village knew they would be coming back and all had sticks to beat this person. It was really a tricky thing to be able to get the pot.

I think about my dear friend who went through a whole series of very powerful initiations as a youngish man in his twenties, and then again later. I said, "Well, these initiations—they're supposed to make you a man or prepare you for something, or a woman fully. What do they really prepare you for?" He laughed and said, "When you complete an initiation, it prepares you for the next initiation." And that's how life is, you know.

One of the famous Inuit shamans sent a young woman who had many visions out to become a shaman like herself and put her out in a little igloo on an ice floe for thirty days with a bit of water and one small dried fish. She said, "I kind of died in there," as you can imagine. She had her vision. She said, "I died a little"—that was her phrase. But we all have to. We all have our initiations if we accept them.

Karlfried Dürckheim, the Zen teacher, writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to that friend who offers them refuge and comfort and encourages their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

Maybe—maybe—out of our political gridlock and suffering today, some new capacities will be born out of this dark night. Maybe we'll move from independence to interdependence, from self-centeredness to thanksgiving.

I like this poem by Heather Altfeld, although I changed it a lot. She wrote a poem about the balance between counting ballots and counting what truly matters:

The last of them there waiting to be counted. Think of them shoveled into piles like old snow. I imagine them in the late night of those rooms, lingering in the smell of yesterday's lunch, in the tepid air with the breath held back by masks. The ballots talking among themselves about the ludicrous folly of humans who should be counting the vanishing whales and tigers. Who should be counting the mountain gorillas and orangutans and the almost-lost ring-tailed lemur and the gopher tortoise. Who should be counting the children behind bars. Who should be voting for phone lines demanding a raise in the minimum age for kindness, demanding a vote on the statutory limitations on human cruelty—a referendum to redeem our cities from an endless migration of sadness and despair. Call it now, she ends. Call it for the rivers, the trees, the rocks.

Call it for the rain, who knows far better than we how to become a fierce and gentle blessing. Vote for the goodness touching us all.

Reflect for a moment as you listen. When did you find trust? What awakened it in you? That sense of the indestructible, the inviolable. You have it, you know. When did you find trust?

Dear friends, the last piece of what I'd like to say. We're all at the crossroads. All of us. And the crossroads is this moment that has infinity, the reality of the present, the eternal now. What will we do at the crossroads? Who are we? What's true is that we're never alone.

There's a story of a young, pious nun who used to go into prayer, raise her eyes, pray and pray, and then came to the Mother Superior and said, "I can't find God. I don't know where to find God." And the Mother Superior looked back at her and said, "You haven't found God, my dear, because you haven't looked down." It's like truly seeing God in the bodies of those nurses and doctors.

"Everything is waiting for you," writes David Whyte. "The great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and see the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."

When I teach and people bring up the sufferings and struggles and difficulties in their life—the shame they carry or guilt for not doing enough for the world, the addiction in their family line, the death of a child or parent, having a new baby and instead of being joyful they're overwhelmed—I'll ask them, "What have you learned about how to handle this? What have you learned from this?" And often they answer something good. Then I turn to the group and say, "What have you all learned?" And a kind of magic happens because the room becomes wise. It's not me or some teaching. It's the shared hearts of everyone together. The room becomes wise. And they remind you from their hearts that you belong, that they've been through it too. They remind you that your being is enough. That you are enough.

We've been training for this difficult time for many years, you know. There'll be more difficult times, as there have been. But we've been training to do this. And as human beings, we've been training for thousands of generations through pandemics and earthquakes and floods and difficulties and hurricanes and cyclones and loss. We've been training.

I love the story of Thomas Merton when he went on his last pilgrimage to India and Southeast Asia, to the lands of the Buddha, when he met with the Dalai Lama and various other sages. He went to Polonnaruwa, an ancient temple in Sri Lanka, where a huge cliff of marble stone had been carved into giant Buddhas with great faces—a whole cliff. He said he stood there and gazed at those faces, and to him it was the most moving work of art he'd ever seen. Because in those eyes, in those faces brought alive, he saw the eyes of infinite compassion and a wise heart that rejected nothing, that understood it all, and whose response was emptiness, vastness, and boundless compassion.

The words of the Buddha: "There are those who discover they can leave behind destructive reactions and become patient as the earth, unmoved by fires of anger or fear, unshaken as a pillar, unperturbed as a clear and quiet pool." This is who you are.

I like to say, go look in the mirror. You look in the mirror and you notice you've aged. Losing fur in some places, getting extra fur in other places, sagging and wrinkling in some ways. As my dear, beloved friend Wes—the dharma teacher and commentator on life—says, "The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard." All these strange things of aging happen. It's just how it is. But there's a strange thing as you look in the mirror.

And that is that you don't necessarily feel much older. You know that? There's the body aging, but actually, I don't feel that. This is so common. And that's because it's only the body that's aged. In that moment of gazing in the mirror, you are becoming what Ajahn Chah called the one who knows—the witnessing, the loving awareness, the mindful loving awareness itself that steps out of identity with the body and rests in the vastness of consciousness and says, "Hmm, it's getting a bit older, that body, isn't it?" Just how it happens.

And there's an understanding in that moment. You become like the Buddha, you become the awakened one who sees with the eyes of understanding, of compassion. You become grateful as you open. Gratitude, mercy—when you look with mindful loving awareness, a mysterious love for it all arises, for the whole of human incarnation. The full catastrophe, as Zorba said. Yes, he had it all, and he danced, and he loved it.

When a baby's born, we all go, "Ooh, baby, baby," and hold it. That new baby smell and that incredible feeling of this little being that's just popped out of—good heavens—her or his mother's body and become, "Here I am, another human being on the planet." Amazing. There's so much love for babies that come in.

And when someone is ready to die and we're fortunate enough to be with them, we hold their hand as they're ready to pass as a gesture of the only thing that matters—a gesture of love. We start with love. We end with love. In fact, that's what you are. It is who you really are. You are loving awareness itself.

So take time to be quiet in this little holiday as best you can. Walk in nature. Sit. Meditate. Do your loving-kindness or your compassion or whatever practice you do. It is the sweet oil that eases the hinge to the gate into the garden inside. You can always go there, says the poet.

It is time for Thanksgiving. So reflect for a moment. Maybe let your eyes close just for a minute. I ask you: What are you most grateful for? And what gives you trust in these difficult times? Where have you learned trust? And what gift are you longing to give to the world?

CHAPTER 100

Q and A: Wonder, Mystery, Awe, Gratitude | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 28 min

> *In this intimate Monday Night Talk, Jack Kornfield engages in direct dialogue with students exploring some of meditation's most profound questions. The session opens with a teaching on the 'sobat'—the Sufi practice of dialogue with the heart—setting the tone for deep inquiry.*
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> *A student's question about equanimity leads to a guided practice exploring how we learned to contract and defend ourselves in childhood, and how witnessing awareness can hold our reactivity with compassion. Jack emphasizes that equanimity isn't about stopping reactions but about finding the spaciousness that recognizes them without being caught. Another student shares the rawness of caregiving for an injured spouse, prompting reflection on how the heart naturally opens and closes in seasons, and how loving awareness holds both our tender connection and our need for rest.*
>
> *The talk addresses the challenging territory of forgiveness—particularly when witnessing suffering caused to others far from us. Jack suggests that compassion, rather than forgiveness, may be the more appropriate practice for systemic injustice, invoking the Dalai Lama's phrase 'my friends, the enemy' and Solzhenitsyn's teaching that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. The session concludes with guidance on vedanā (feeling-tone) practice, encouraging a student to approach this foundational teaching with beginner's mind and appreciation for the profound mystery of human feeling itself.*

Trust your good hearts, you know. It doesn't take very long, just a minute or two to get quiet and listen. And when you do, it's called a sobat. The Sufis call it a dialogue with the heart. When you ask, the heart will answer.

I think now we will shift to do a little bit of dialogue with a few people who have questions—and hopefully they also have answers. Let's find out.

Question: I was hoping you might talk about equanimity. Too often I feel like a leaf in the wind. Someone praises me, likes what I've done, and I feel buoyed and happy. Someone else argues with me or criticizes me, and my mood goes down. I think with sitting, I'm becoming more aware that this happens, but I don't feel stability. I still feel like I'm being pushed here and there. I just wondered if you had thoughts about that.

Jack Kornfield: Let's do a tiny bit of practice together, because it's such an important question, and you've articulated it so well. Already you're becoming quite mindful of it.

So if you're kind enough, let your eyes close and remember a time—let's go for blame because that's the tough one—when somebody criticized, judged, or blamed you. Let one pop up on the screen inside. You don't have to tell the content, but just remember it. Tell me when you have a scene.

Student: I do.

Jack Kornfield: Okay. And now notice: the blame arises, the judgment arises, and then you have a reaction. So notice what the reaction is without judging it.

Student: I think the reaction is being defensive, protecting myself, explaining to myself why I'm right.

Jack Kornfield: So feel that. Feel the defensiveness, the protection, and the contraction. If it had a center in your body, where would it be? Someplace most central to it.

Student: Probably my stomach.

Jack Kornfield: So feel that place in your stomach. What's it like? Tight, hot, cold, throttling?

Student: Tight, a bit uncomfortable.

Jack Kornfield: So feel its tight and uncomfortable place. You've been attacked, it feels like, and now you're tight and defending yourself and trying to make yourself right.

One more question: How long ago did you learn to tighten up and contract and defend yourself? When did you first learn it? How old were you?

Student: Oh, gosh.

Jack Kornfield: Pick a number.

Student: Elementary school.

Jack Kornfield: Yeah. Before that.

Student: Yeah, five years old, something like that.

Jack Kornfield: So see this little five-year-old Greg, and somebody's criticizing him, and he doesn't know any better. He thinks there's something wrong with him, and he has to protect himself from that. Protect. Defend.

So if you could put him in your lap now and hold him and say, you know—this is the way incarnation is.

Some people like and some people don't. They judge and they bless and they praise and they blame. And we'll get through this, okay? Let me just hold you a little bit. See how he likes that.

Yeah, I think he likes that.

And now notice that you actually have become the witness to this whole drama—to the child who's been trying to defend himself, and to the adult who remembers and feels it in his stomach. And feel that witnessing like the space in the room. You're actually the vast space of awareness, of loving awareness, mindful loving awareness, that's noticing all this.

You've done it beautifully. And the fact that you can notice it means that it's not who you are. It's part of the drama. And the point of equanimity is not to have the reactions come—they're just reactions. You can bow to them and say, "Oh, yeah, here you are, pain. Here you are, fear. Here you are, defending yourself." Then you can feel that child, though frightened about the world, with compassion. And then you can be like those images from Polonaruwa. You see it all, rejecting none of it, through the great heart of compassion.

How are you doing?

Good. Thank you.

Thank you for that. That was very helpful. I mean, it's not an easy thing to do it in front of lots of people. There was a lot of courage to do that. I appreciate it. And it's not your question—it's our question. All these people are hanging on the screen saying, "Okay, how about me too?" Because the point of equanimity is not to stop the dance, but to come to that stillness and spaciousness that says, "Oh, yeah. This is part of being human. It's okay." And not actually get caught, not believe it so much. You did it beautifully. Thank you.

"Hi, Jack. Can you hear me? It's Arisika."

Oh, hello. I love you, Arisika, my dear friend of so long.

"So I have a question. I think I got this great gift in that on November 1st, right before the election and right before my birthday, my husband fell and fractured a vertebra. Had to be taken out in a sling, down the stairs. And he's been recovering, but it's slow. There are periods when he's in pain, and so I hear this moaning and groaning, and it really takes me back to the twenty years I was a midwife. I feel so connected to all the people all over the world who are caring for loved ones. And I feel this paradoxical, immense gratitude that I can drive to—there is a pharmacy, I can drive there in five minutes, we can get all this paraphernalia, there's running water, there's a washing machine, you know..."

So all this gratitude, and at the same time just such openness of the heart. For the first couple of days, I actually occasionally had pain in the parts of my body where he was hurting. Part of the question is this issue about the differences or boundaries between loving-kindness and equanimity. I'm realizing that I haven't felt this raw and this connected to suffering. I know about the suffering—certainly there's been all the suffering around Black Lives Matter and all these murdered black people and all of that. But this... I mean, we didn't even pay much attention to the election because we were so busy just caring for one another. And so there's some question: if I don't feel this raw, if the heart isn't opening like this with something coming out—is it only when I'm so close to suffering that I can feel it? I just noticed how different it is. I'm not being very coherent, but do you have any thoughts?

First of all, I'm just really touched by what you say, because we've known each other for a long time. And I do know you've lived through a great deal—the sufferings, whether in the family or community, or being a black woman in a racist culture, all of these things, and your work as a midwife and teacher. My experience of you is that you are actually beautiful and perfect exactly as you are. I hate to say this to you.

And with that, I also know that the heart has its seasons. Just as the body breathes—you know this—and the cerebrospinal fluid pulses, and the menstrual cycles move with the moon and the tides, so too does the connecting heart, which is what you're talking about. It opens and closes. Sometimes we want it open, but you can't always live that

way. And this is okay enough. We need to come back and just be peaceful for a bit. It's just too much to carry. Sometimes it feels deeply connected, and then sometimes that passes. Because everything is impermanent, that's impermanent too.

What I hear you describing—and I could bow to it—is the deep, intimate, tender connection that comes in that kind of love that you have in your marriage and with the people you care about. Sometimes it's very raw. Sometimes it's raw because it's the world and you feel it. And then sometimes you take a breath and you realize, wow, that was a time of being really raw. It's not like one of them is right and another isn't. The space of loving awareness, of mindfulness, holds all of that and says, yes, this is our human life. And I see you doing it really damn well.

How does that sound to you?

Thank you, Jack.

It's a pleasure. And is he getting better?

Yes, he's getting better. It's just slow. His body—he's eighty, so...

Yeah, you're older, it takes its time. I'm only seventy-five, but I can relate. Thank you.

The next person who appeared spoke: Hi, Jack. This is Seema.

Hi, Seema.

I am thrilled to be in your presence. I'm one of your students in the MMTCP program.

Oh, wonderful.

I have been thanking the pain that I have experienced in life. What I'm noticing is that the forgiveness I had when I was twenty-eight, when my father was shot in the middle of the street back home in Iran—I forgave the person who killed my father. And then right after that, my daughter had PTSD because of the war between Iran and Iraq. I remember that I came to you one day at Spirit Rock and I asked you, "How can I forgive Ahmadinejad?" And you told me, "Just like you and I, he had a mom who cared for him."

But as we go on, I realized that forgiving someone who has done something away from me and my family is actually harder. I find it much harder to forgive someone who is keeping children in cages or doing something to people who are not related to me. I just wanted to see if you have something that can help me.

This is not just your question—it's really a question for a lot of us. There is so much pain that we create. We could call it tragic, because we know better as human beings, and yet some of us are doing things that bring grievous pain to children, to vulnerable people. And it is heartbreaking.

So first, let me just acknowledge what you're describing: some of the great sufferings of the world that you see, and in particular, those who are causing that suffering.

I'm not even sure forgiveness is the right practice for that. Who are we to judge them or forgive them? What we see is that they're creating suffering, and it may inspire us to do what we can to prevent that from continuing—to stand up in whatever ways we can for justice, to stop it in all the ways available to us.

I think there's a place for compassion here. It's a very different channel than forgiveness.

I think about the Dalai Lama speaking of the Chinese military, who not only took over Tibet but burned the sacred monasteries and texts, killed so many monks and nuns, imprisoned them. And he calls them "my friends, the enemy." It's interesting he uses that word. He doesn't just say "my friends." He says, "my friends, the enemy—those who are trying to destroy us."

When he speaks, he speaks about seeing with the eyes of compassion. He says even they, just as we talked about, even they had moms. Even they have their reasons, even if those reasons are twisted and hateful and ignorant, based on so many falsehoods and greed and so forth. He gazes with the eyes of compassion and says, "Yes, they too suffer. They cause suffering, and they will suffer."

There's a way in which I don't want to answer your question because I don't think it's fair. It's too deep a question to just give a verbal answer to.

I think of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was in the gulags in Siberia, tortured at times. He said, "It would be so easy if we could blame someone over there—the evil ones—and only get them out of the world, and then everything would be fine. But the line dividing good and evil also cuts through our own hearts. And how can we get rid of a part of our heart?"

So I don't have a simple answer for you. I think forgiveness may be the wrong frame, and that actually it's just compassion for so much suffering.

Doesn't forgiveness start with compassion?

It does. And it might come to that, and it might not. But I wouldn't even aim for that. If you can live with compassion, that already is actually quite magnificent.

How does that feel to you as we talk? Does it feel like it's skipping over the problem?

You said, when does the trust start?

Well, part of the trust is also knowing what's true. You can trust someone who is doing terrible things to continue to do terrible things. It doesn't mean you trust them to be something other than that. You can trust your own perceptions: "Oh, this person is so caught in their hate that what I trust is what I see, and that's what's there."

I think you need to really trust that you see with some clarity. And then you trust: What can I do? What am I able to do in this world that reduces suffering, that protects those as best I can?

I think the same wisdom or teachings that have helped me not to be destroyed, and to be a mindfulness teacher myself in the future, is going to hold the space for me. So that's the kind of trust that I'm talking about.

And I listen to you when you talk about the way your father was shot and killed, and then your daughter too. It's so powerful to hear what you say. You have what Dürckheim talked about—going through something that was annihilating. You now have a kind of moral authority to tell the truth about compassion and pain, because you know it. And to say, "Yes, and that's not all of who we are." You know something bigger, and that's a great gift.

So I honor that. Thank you, Seema.

Thank you, Jack.

"Oh, it's Tim!" Another friend from years and years back.

"How are you?"

"I'm great. It's so great to see you and hear you. I think we met about 44 years ago back at IMS. Every time you speak, it's something new."

"Well, I'm pleased to see you."

"Likewise. So I've been kind of going back to basics a little with my practice, and I've been trying to explore the Vedana practice."

Vedana—feeling, pleasant, neutral, unpleasant, yes.

"I've checked out like six different books and different guided meditations, and I just feel like they're either all over the place or they're not quite right. I was wondering if you had any guidance, any tips on good books or guided meditation recordings, or where to go for something like that."

You're talking about feeling. And there are two dimensions to it. One is the traditional dimension: that every experience can be felt as pleasant or neutral or unpleasant, and we tend to grasp the pleasant and resist the unpleasant. Becoming mindful of that is a gateway to liberation. In some way, that's probably all you need. The rest of those books you can put on your shelf for somebody else to read, honestly.

But there's also something really mysterious about feeling. We are in this human incarnation, and part of what makes us alive is the fact that we can feel. I have friends who are working on the biggest AI project in the world for artificial intelligence computing, and their big question is: is it ever going to start to feel? Because that's what makes us human—that we feel joy and sorrow. There are the primary feelings, and then all these secondary emotions. From pleasure and pain come joy and sorrow, grief and delight, and so forth.

I think more of the practice is to appreciate feeling, not to figure it out, because it's a mystery. Nobody really knows how it is that we have feeling. It's ridiculous that life should feel in consciousness—and it does. It brings tears and it brings art. It brings communion and it brings war. It brings everything out of feelings, which is why the Buddhists say pay attention to feelings, because they can lead you different ways.

Let it be more of a mystery. Keep it really simple. Notice what feelings you follow. There's a practice in that: which feelings arise and which feelings you follow. Follow in what sense? It's not just that you avoid unpleasant and follow pleasant—there are all the secondary feelings and emotions. If you understand that, you start to become really wise about who Tim is in his life and his personality. And hopefully from it comes a greater and greater compassion and understanding. Wow, look at all this. This is what human life is like.

I'm just deeply appreciative that you're practicing with beginner's mind after 44 years. And I'll tell you a funny little story just as a way to end.

Sharon Salzberg, who we all know—the great goddess of metta, wonderful teacher and friend and colleague—when she was young in India, she was practicing as a very ardent student of Vipassana and meditation with Goenka and Munindra and Dipa Ma, her teachers. Somebody handed her the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* from Suzuki Roshi, which was published around that time, late 60s, early 70s. She looked at it and sort of tossed it aside and said, "I'm not a beginner. I don't need the beginning book." She told me this later. Only when she opened it did she discover what he says: the goal of meditation, the end of meditation, is always to keep your beginner's mind—in such a deep and brilliant way.

I know that when I go on retreat, sometimes I'll take it and just open it to a random page. Wherever I am, Suzuki Roshi speaks to me. It has that kind of absolute simplicity and absolute depth. So your inquiry into the mystery of feeling is totally cool. And beginner's mind is an advanced practice, so I salute you for it.

All right, everyone. Let's just take a couple of breaths, if you will. Be quiet just for half a minute. Feel whatever's touched or inspired you that you want to remember, because it's what you already know. Know that you can trust your good hearts.

There are twenty, thirty, fifty, sixty of us here together. You can also put words in the chat if you like. And there are probably thousands of people listening on Facebook as well. Say hello, or "I love you," or namaste, or whatever you wish to say. Greet each other. Bless one another. Wish everyone a good Thanksgiving in whatever way feels right.

Thank you. I want to look at all of you.

Be happy.

Have a glorious and wise and loving and peaceful and quiet and grateful Thanksgiving, in whatever way is possible and good for you.

CHAPTER 101

Meditation: Just Like Me Compassion Practice

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this Monday night teaching from Spirit Rock Center, Jack Kornfield offers a guided meditation practice called 'Just Like Me,' drawn from the wisdom of teachers including Joanna Macy, Mirabai Bush, and Ram Dass. Recorded during the Thanksgiving season of a particularly divisive year, this talk addresses the universal challenge of relating to people who seem different from us—whether family members with opposing views or those we find difficult to understand.*
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> *The practice itself is a form of mettā (loving-kindness) and karuṇā (compassion) meditation. Practitioners are invited to visualize a difficult person and reflect on their shared humanity through a series of contemplations: 'This person was once a small child, just like me... has known physical pain, just like me... wants to be loved, just like me.' By recognizing our common experiences of joy, sorrow, confusion, and longing, the heart naturally softens toward those we might otherwise hold at a distance.*
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> *Kornfield reminds us that when we see others with 'the eyes and heart of wisdom,' we recognize that our shared humanity runs far deeper than our differences. He encourages practitioners to approach this meditation without self-judgment—if it resonates, continue with it; if not, return to simple mindful awareness. This practice offers a skillful means for transforming our relationship with difficult people, reminding us that behind every pair of eyes is the same original spirit that dwells within ourselves.*

Good evening, everyone who is here together watching, listening. It's a pleasure to welcome you to this Monday night teaching from Spirit Rock Center. If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and this is the 36th year that I've been able to teach these Monday night classes. Mostly it was once a week for thirty-some years, and the last few years it's been once a month. I'm really grateful to be able to do it—to reflect, to come together, to share with you, and somehow to listen. Because more than anything, I see these as a reminder of what we already know in our hearts, but that gets lost in the busyness of our lives.

It is, as we all know, a really divisive time. A lot of division—political, of course, very obviously for those of you who are in the U.S., but other parts of the world as well. Socially divisive. And now, in Thanksgiving week, you're about to—if not go home to your family—maybe Zoom with your family and friends. Have your Thanksgiving extended

family Zoom. And there you have to be with those weird uncles and strange cousins, the ones who believe conspiracies that you don't believe in, or who voted differently than you did and so forth.

How do you relate to people who are different? By the way, they're all different, but the ones that are wildly different and stranger—the fact is, we're all strange. And we all took this human incarnation. In truth, we have more in common than not. In huge ways—not only 99.9% of our DNA—but when we see one another with the heart of wisdom, with the eyes of wisdom, however strange the other seems, when we look in the eyes of another or we just gaze over at another in a simple way and see them with the eyes and heart of wisdom, we're reminded that it's a bigger and different game than all our ideas.

So what we do on Monday night, and we'll do in just a moment, is start with a meditation for a time, follow it by a five-minute break to stretch or relax, and then some teachings and dialogue with others.

Let's begin with this meditation.

Let yourself find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease. This guided meditation is built on some of the beautiful practices from Joanna Macy and Mirabai Bush and Ram Dass and other dear friends. It is a practice sometimes called Just Like Me.

When you're ready, feet flat on the floor or body resting on the cushion or wherever you are, let yourself settle on this earth, halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. Let your eyes close gently. Take a few deep breaths to allow yourself to exhale and release whatever you can easily. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position.

Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Feel your seat on the earth. How gravity pulls you—and you can let go and rest, fully supported where you sit. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the breathing of your body, how it gently and rhythmically breathes itself into breathing with the air, the trees, the wind, all the other creatures around you breathing the same breath. Let your body breathe on its own and you become the witness, the loving awareness that notices this breath. Relax with it, and from a place of presence and some invitation of stillness, we'll do a guided reflection.

Let yourself picture and imagine or envision, in the Thanksgiving and the holiday season coming up, that you will be encountering people who sometimes feel very different than you, or difficult for you, hard to understand, or sometimes just hard to be with. Let yourself select a person in that category. In the traditional teachings of loving-kindness, this person is sometimes referred to as a difficult person. Envision how you might see them—likely on Zoom this crazy year, but oftentimes in person—and imagine or sense that you can now gaze at this person with the heart of wisdom.

And as you picture them, let yourself reflect. This person is incarnated in a body going through life, just like me. This person was once a small child, a little vulnerable child, just like me. Be aware of all the emotions and feelings that arise with each of these reflections. This person has had happy times in their life, just like me. This person is creative, just like me. This person has loved someone, just like me. This person's heart has been broken, just like me.

This person has their measure of sorrows and sadness, just like me. This person has been hurt and disappointed, just like me. This person has been confused by life, just like me. This person has known physical pain, just like me. This person will be young and old, friend and enemy, just like me. This person has regrets, just like me. This person wants to be loved, just like me.

Look at their image. See that behind their eyes is the original spirit born into each one of us. Picture this person's happiest moments as a child—laughing, playing, joyful times. The child of the spirit is still in them, just like me.

As you gaze at them in your mind's eye with the heart of wisdom: I know you want to be happy, just like me. I wish you strength and support and healing in your life so that you can offer your gifts to yourself and the world, just like me. I wish for you blessings and courage, honesty and care, love and compassion, for you are a human being, just like me.

As you reflect, as you see with the heart, notice how this practice has changed the way you hold this person and the way you hold yourself. This practice is a form of loving-kindness and compassion.

Now let yourself continue in the stillness and picture yet another one or two or three people. Each one that you envision and hold in your mind's eye and in your heart, in your own way, gaze at them and reflect just as we have. This person is—and you can fill in the blank—just like me. If you are still continuing with this practice of compassion

and loving-kindness, stay with it. And if you feel like you've had enough of this particular active practice and you want to just rest and be, let it go and rest in the reality of the present.

Become loving awareness that notices the breath breathing itself, that notices the rise and fall of feelings and thoughts and sounds like waves of the ocean coming and going around the breath. Rest in the present. You are loving awareness.

For those who found this meditation to be of value for yourself, or perhaps for something that you might do with others, there is a version of it printed in my book, *No Time Like the Present*. You can find it there toward the end of the book.

What I always say at the end of a meditation, especially if it's guided and introduced in this way as a new practice: please don't use it to judge yourself. It may have been useful and mind and heart opening—lovely. Do it some more. Practice with it. It also may have felt mechanical or artificial, or even brought up its opposite. Hold that too with the same mindful loving awareness and simply recognize that it wasn't necessarily the right practice for you on this evening at this time. Know that there are dozens of other fine practices that we do together and alone. If this is of use, take its benefit, and if not, let it go and come back to the mindful, loving awareness that is the essence of our practice. Keep it simple.

CHAPTER 102

Rekindle and Renew | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 40 min

> *In this winter solstice teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together the rhythms of celestial events—the new moon, solar eclipse, and meteor showers—with an ancient Chinese story about Seijo, a woman split from herself who eventually returns home. The story, traditionally explored in Zen's Mumonkan as a kōan about one's true self, becomes a lens for examining our modern exile from body, heart, mind, and the living earth.*
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> *Kornfield reflects on how contemporary culture separates us from embodied presence, from one another across political and social divides, and from the natural world. He offers the practice of mindful loving awareness as a path of return—not through special attainment but through tender attention to what has been exiled. Drawing from teachers including Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Nisargadatta, he emphasizes that separation is ultimately a dream, and that consciousness itself remains whole beneath the stories, emotions, and physical sensations we experience.*
>
> *The talk acknowledges the genuine difficulties of the pandemic winter ahead while pointing toward trust in healing—the body's natural capacity to mend, the heart's ability to hold all emotions with compassion, and our interconnection with all beings. Through stories of unexpected human connection and the Council for All Beings practice, Kornfield invites listeners to recognize that returning from exile is limited only by the heart's willingness to listen and reconnect.*

So hello again after our meditation.

Before I talk or offer any teachings tonight, I want to remind you that the teachings are really not something to believe. They're a kind of meditation or reflection. At their best, they remind you of something that you already know. At their worst, just throw them away. They're not right for you, or maybe not right at all. So you get to have a kind of discernment and really use them, if anything, just to tune to your own wisdom and your own love.

I'd like to start by lighting a candle—it's an electronic candle. Nevertheless, it's a wonderful one, like the one we found at Ram Dass's house, now from Costco, with a little flickering wick in it. Trudy picked them up and it's just great.

I want to light a candle to honor this special day because it's a time coming close to the winter solstice. Today is also a day of the new moon and a full solar eclipse if you were down in Chile and South America. It's also the time of the Geminid meteor showers. Trudy and I went out last night late, looked up in the middle of the sky and waited, and sure enough every minute or so another falling star would show itself silently. That's true for a few more nights—it's the best meteor shower of the year.

I remember when I've had the opportunity to look through a big telescope and see what seemed like points of light in the sky. There was Jupiter, and then you could see the moons going around Jupiter. There was Mercury, and you could see its pockmarked face like the face of our moon. Or Venus moving. In some way there was a magic in it because there was a sense of this slow and elegant—I think the phrase is the music of the spheres—this dance of the orbs that we are a part of. Just as you could feel the trust of your breath breathing in and out, I could somehow feel the dance of the spheres and the music as part of this whole organic tapestry of light and life that's given us our lives.

And of course, all over the Northern Hemisphere now, there are rituals like Christmas and Hanukkah lights and Kwanzaa and Persian festivals and ones in Muslim and Indian traditions and so forth for the solstice—the time for renewal, the time for celebration, a time for trusting that the light will return.

This is really important right now for us to feel, not just to see it or think of it. Vaccines are being distributed today in the US for the first time, and there's the light of the end of the pandemic, even if it's going to be a tough winter. We can see the end of it. And here in California where there's been such a long fire season, we've had beautiful rains in Northern California—the end of the fire season for now.

Like the poet Deena Metzger says: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again."

This turning of the seasons is the beginning of something new, the beginning of the end of the pandemic and the fire season. It's also, this very day, the Electoral College's work to appoint our next President of the United States, President Biden. In spite of some pretty nutty conspiracy things that were out there, we can take a breath and say, ah, the democratic process of the polls has come to a conclusion that was fair. Somehow we can trust maybe that in this new year, no matter how divided we are, and despite the incredible pain that still exists from racism and economic injustice and caste systems and all of those kinds of things—we're beginning to feel our hearts and collective will move toward the healing, toward the wellbeing of humans and the world around us.

So I'd like to tell a story tonight. You know, I'm a storyteller. It's just what I do. Ram Dass once told me I tell too many stories. I looked at him and said, "Ram Dass, this is the pot and the kettle, you know?"

But here's a story for you. The thing about stories is that they're not just stories. The old stories—and this is an old Chinese story—their word *story* also means *storehouse*. They carry within them, these stories that have been told for centuries, a whole storehouse of understanding and wisdom. So I'll let you sense what's in the storehouse. I'll unpack it in my way, but maybe you'll find other treasures.

Once upon a time, as the story is told, and it's told to be a true story, there was a family that lived in a village along a river in west central China. The father of this family, who was a farmer and basically a good man, married a woman from the village and they had two daughters. When the first daughter was six years old, she got ill and died, which broke the heart of her mother, who also fell ill that year and died. Now the father was left with one daughter only, and she became the light of his life. Her name was Sam, or Sanjo, and she was a lovely little child.

He did everything for her, and she liked to play. Her favorite playmate was a distant cousin who lived nearby in the village, Ochu. They played together so well. He was a handsome little boy and they just enjoyed each other. Even the father would say, watching them and seeing how they enjoyed themselves, "You'd make a good marriage when you grow up." Somehow in their little children's hearts, which are very tender and listen very carefully to what the big people say, they believed that they were engaged.

Then it came, as she grew older, time for her to get married. Her father, seeking the best hand for her, found a young man, Henryo, from a very good family and told her that this was who she would marry. She was shocked and heartbroken. And she told Ochu, "I can't marry you."

My father is marrying me off to Henryu.

And Ochu could barely stand it as well. You can imagine after all those years of their play and love. He wept, she wept, cast down and depressed.

And Ochu, unable to bear the pain, put his meager belongings into a small boat, said to his parents, "I can't stay here anymore," and set off down the river that went through the village.

Seijo was so heartbroken herself that she ran away. She ran down the path alongside the river, crying and weeping and calling out. And Ochu heard this voice, this familiar voice. "Oh, Seijo, it's you, it's you!" And he pulled over and she stepped into the boat. They hugged each other and set off down the river, running away, eloping to go to the next province far away and start a new life.

When they got there, this handsome and beautiful new couple found a small place to live. Someone took them in, they began to work and farm and help, and pretty soon they had their own children, a little boy and a little girl.

But over the years, over the first few years of these children's lives, Seijo and her husband Ochu began to feel more and more that there was something wrong, that they had hurt their parents by fleeing. And Seijo especially needed to return, she said, to ask forgiveness of her father.

So they found a boat again and put themselves in it and went back up the river, finally landing at the dock just by her old father's house. Ochu got out first and went to knock at the door. The astonished father, who looked so much older and so tired, saw him. Ochu said, "We've come back. I brought Seijo with me to see you. We want to see you. We want to ask your forgiveness."

The father's eyes grew wide and he said, "This is impossible. This is impossible. You can't bring her with you. She is here. She's been here all along. In fact, when you left, she took to her bed and has not spoken a word since then. We feed her, but she will not say a word, and she has not gotten up for five years. You can look in there and see her."

Ochu took a peek and he said, "Father, she is in the boat. You must come with me."

The father first sent his servant, who nodded yes, and invited Seijo to follow the servant back to the house. The father's eyes grew even wider as he saw his daughter now coming back toward him, older. "Who is this?" he said. "Who could you be?"

And as she walked toward the house, the Seijo that lay in the bed heard this voice and sat up and stood up. The two Seijos walked toward one another until they came together as one and laughed and cried. They brought the two children from the boat and hugged her father and said, "These are your grandchildren." And they all stood there in wonder.

That tenderness is the end of the story.

Now, of course, there are many levels to a story. This story has been told in the great Zen text, the Mumonkan. The question it often asks is: who is your true self? Sometimes it's called "Seijo Loses Her Soul." The question for us is: can we come back? Can we come back to ourselves?

For we live in a culture, if you think about it and look, that's really split. You remember that line from James Joyce where he wrote, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." And so we have our kids sitting at desks all day long or watching a screen now, because that's all they can do in the pandemic, when half the time they should be out running and playing in the playground, in the woods, living the life of a child in some physical way.

We've split ourselves off, not only from our bodies, but from the bodies of others. You can drive through the streets of our cities and see the homeless encampments and the people in tents. Or the 800,000 or one million DACA children who were brought here as young children and are now threatened to be sent back to places they don't know, languages they don't speak.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said of modern society, how it looked to him: "Lost in thought, separated from one another."

I know when I come back to the US after I've traveled to other countries—warm Latin countries or my favorite places in Asia or in Africa, where the men hold hands and put their arms around each other, where they're not so homophobic, where they love each other, where that's not scary to the men, to be tender and close with each other—I feel when I come back, "Oh, I'm back in the cold north." You know what I'm talking about.

And COVID, of course, has highlighted it and made it more so.

And then our crazy divided politics, where we are split and separated. There's a kind of toxic nostalgia that divides us even more—the legacy of our history of white supremacy, the imagined past of the 1950s where women knew their place. That kind of toxic nostalgia, or the 1850s where people of color knew their place. We're still fighting that civil war. In many ways, we're in exile from one another.

But there's another possibility. And in your heart, you all know this.

This is part of a little story that my daughter wrote for her nonprofit, Oasis in Berkeley, which works to get asylum for LGBT people from around the world whose lives are in danger. She said: "Our clients and staff provide me with inspiration. I'm reminded of a young law student from Saudi Arabia, Mariam, who was attending law school in the

Bay Area and volunteered to help at Oasis. She was accompanying Elena, a transgender woman from El Salvador, to her asylum interview, despite Mariam's own conflicted cultural feelings around sexual orientation and gender identity—quite different from Elena's. But Mariam was professional, courteous, and respectful as she prepared the client for the hearing. She didn't engage in small talk during the BART ride on what would be one of the most difficult days in Elena's life. Mariam and Elena sat silently in a sterile waiting room. The asylum officer was running late. One hour, then two hours went by.

"Finally Elena pulled out her phone and showed Mariam a photo of her Pomeranian, Lily. Mariam's face lit up—she too had a Pomeranian, named Ali. They traded photos and stories and soon moved on to their love of jewel-studded high heels and Louis Vuitton purses. Mariam taught Elena about the abaya she was wearing.

"By the time the officer was ready, four hours later, Elena's fear had receded and Mariam was whispering reassuring cheers as they walked into the room. Standing outside the station at the end of the day, they held hands and each thanked the other. Elena had won asylum, escaping almost certain death if she returned to El Salvador, and Mariam was preparing to return to her life in Saudi Arabia. They would likely never meet again, but my heart was moved as I watched how each had a profound impact on the other's life."

Though these times can feel dark, we must remember that when we're able to sit down and talk to one another, to see the world through another's eyes and believe in our common humanity, there is hope.

Mindful loving awareness, no matter the darkness, is an invitation to trust—to know that it's never too late to start again. We don't know the full extent of our exile until we stop. Maybe when you meditate, or you pause and let yourself return back to your own body and heart because you've been too busy and too pulled upon by the culture and divided—like Seijo, you come back to yourself. And when you do, often the tears need to come.

The Buddha commended this in one of his stories, where he told his monks about a great elephant that had been captured in the forest and brought to the king to be the lead elephant in the king's army. It was the great father of the elephants in the forest. They began to train it, and it was a magnificent creature. The king would visit, but when it was time to get ready for military campaigns, the elephant would not move.

The king asked the elephant trainer, "What's happened?"

The trainer said, "I was trying to figure it out myself. I got word from those who brought elephants to the palace that this elephant's old mother has been sick. This great elephant had been bringing her food, and now it must be worried about her."

So the king went to the elephant and said, "We will bring your mother here and provide her with food every day." And they did. The majestic elephant then was happy and led the king's forces and parades.

At the end of telling the story, the Buddha said, "When you tell this story, the hearts of those who hear it are softened. Now they can hear the Dharma. Now they can hear what is true."

So when we start to pay attention and begin to listen, part of that listening may be difficult. As in this story, maybe the first part is to feel our tears, to feel the losses, to feel the exile from one another, to feel the division in the culture.

I was listening to Paul Simon sing "American Tune," which Trudy, Teja, and I would sometimes sing at the end of retreats we led at Spirit Rock. It's such a wonderful song. There's a verse I find very poignant for these times, where he sings: "I don't know a soul who's not been battered. I don't have a friend who feels at ease. I don't know a dream that's not been shattered or driven to its knees—yet it's all right." And in another line he says, "We come in the age's most uncertain hour." He's a beautiful poet. The age's most uncertain hour.

You see, our practice of presence, of mindful loving awareness, is not one of having some special attainment, some special state—those come and go. And it's not a grim duty to meditate. It's an invitation of tenderness and courage, of intimacy and wonder.

To trust that it's possible to become intimate with all things, as Zen Master Dogen says—even in exile, even in the darkest night of the year—that our attention itself is what knits us back together.

And we can start with our body, the dignity of your body. We've been so separated, many of us, from our bodies. And it's time to listen. The great playwright Molière writes, "All the ills of humankind, all the tragic misfortunes that fill the history books, all the political blunders, all the failures of the great leaders have arisen merely from a lack of skill at dancing." There's something so beautiful and deep and comedic in this, as Molière was, but also true. What does it mean to actually inhabit this wild, miraculous, amazing human body?

I watched my little grandson Desmond, who has a sandbox in the yard—a big red plastic sandbox with all his toys, and it has a big red lid. He took the lid off. He's two years old. First he was sifting the sand in his hands, and he just loved feeling the earth and the sand, and that was enough to make him happy. Then he took handfuls of the sand and put it into the lid to make a second sandbox on the grass on the ground next to it. And then he got into it and started to twirl, making a big circle, round and round. He just enjoyed being there in the center of his own body, in his own world, and he laughed. It was so beautiful to see.

One of the great meditation masters in Ajahn Chah's lineage said, "In your search for enlightenment, do not desert the body." And so we can begin to trust. As Voltaire said, the art of medicine primarily consists of amusing the patient while nature does the healing. Just as you could feel how you trust the breath to come in and out, each breath after another—even if you're sick or you go to the hospital, you have to have your bone set or you have surgery—what does the healing? The bones knit, the wound begins to heal. We keep it clean, we keep the infection away. The body knows how to heal itself. We can trust this.

Even the neuroscientists show how with meditation, the traumas and the things that have divided our nervous system, with practice, begin to knit back together again. The things that have separated—we can become more whole. We can come back to ourselves.

So close your eyes for a moment to reflect. As we did in the meditation to begin with, really be in tune with this marvelous body, to come back from any exile. What does this body want and ask? You can know. What wants to be listened to, honored, felt?

Let your eyes open again.

Just as you can trust the breath, just as you can trust the body to heal itself and to speak to you when you ask and listen, so too you can trust the heart. We get exiled from our heart as well. Ajahn Chah said, "If you haven't wept deeply, you haven't really begun to meditate." It's going to be one part of your practice—the tears, the ocean of tears. As we get quiet, there's grief and longing and rage and love and joy and fear, all these things held in the heart.

When we're exiled from the heart... Vivek Murthy, who is the Surgeon General under President Obama and now again under President Biden, said that the majority of what comes through the doors in the hospitals and clinics in the US has its origin in our emotions and our lack of awareness of them. I hope that rings true for you. You can under-

stand it—the level of stress, the level of pain, the lack of awareness, the inability to grieve, to love, to long, to touch, to be in the heart—then manifesting in all these physical ways.

But the poet Ghalib says, "When after heavy rain the storm clouds disperse, is it not clear that they have wept themselves to the end?" And one of the most beautiful things we learn from mindful loving awareness is that we can be aware of all of our emotions—the grief and the love, the longing and the pain, the fear and the joy and the excitement. Mindful loving awareness makes the space for all of these to be held in the great heart of compassion.

Again, take a moment. Close your eyes and reflect. What emotions and feelings are in exile? What's asking to be felt? You can know. The heart will speak.

And then there's the mind—the mind of stories and thoughts and images. That thinking mind, which is a good servant but a poor master. Do we believe all those stories? I hope not.

I remember going to see Ram Dass in the last few years. I went to see him after a period that had been a really busy time, and he asked, "So how are you?" I said, "Too busy."

And he looked at me with a smile and said, "Drop the 'too.'"

It was a beautiful moment, because the "too" was saying it wasn't the way it should be—the judgment, the judging mind. Instead, I could simply say, "Oh, how am I? I'm busy," or "I'm tired."

One of the beautiful things about mindful loving awareness, about ending exile with our bodies and our hearts, is that we can see what's in our mind. "Oh, that's the judging mind. That's the body of fear mind." Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay for now. It's all right. Thank you for your opinion. We don't have to believe all of those thoughts.

And we begin to trust that under all the stories and ideas and fixed opinions and views, under the shame and the longing and the hope, is a deep silence. Like this time of year in the fertile darkness, there is a vast stillness, like the music of the spheres. For what we are is not those thoughts or emotions or this body—we are consciousness itself, timeless and still, the witness to it all.

And here's where we reconnect.

The last of these reconnections, of coming back as Seijo did, is to the body of the earth that is our body. Joanna Macy, together with John Seed, used to hold what were called the Council for All Beings. In these weekend or week-long rituals, participants were invited to go and spend time in the woods, by the streams, in the mountains, and find their connection with something that needed a voice in the human world. Then they came back into council. Each one of them—sometimes because they made it a beautiful ritual—would come back in costume of some kind or create a mask. But really it was the voice of their heart. One at a time they would be invited to speak to the human family: "I speak for the salmon, and our rivers are gone—dammed or polluted." And the voice of the salmon would come through that human. "I speak for the otters. I speak for the glaciers. I speak for the condors, for the ocean."

We have this miraculous capacity to return from disconnection and exile and come back to be truly connected. We know this—it's deep in us. When the hurricane hit Houston and the whole city was flooded some years ago, people were on their roofs waiting to be rescued with their children and their dogs. The whole Cajun Navy came—people with their airboats from Louisiana and Mississippi, saying, "It's our brothers, our sisters." This is what it means to come back, as Seijo did.

"The mind creates the abyss," says Nisargadatta, "and the heart crosses it."

Or the great mystic poet Kabir says, "Are you looking for me? I'm in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours."

You see, the deep lesson from Seijo is that you've never really been separated, that the separation is only a dream. The salmon and the glaciers and the otters and all that you care about, the fields of alfalfa and the kelp in the ocean—they're all in your blood and breath. They are you too. And the separation is only a dream.

So we light our candles for love, and the gift of our meditation practice is to take time to quiet the mind and bring a sacred presence. Even if it's boring—Gandhi called it "blessed monotony"—do it anyway. Because the goal is not to be somewhere else, but to open the eyes of the eyes and the ears of the ears.

This is going to be a tough winter. More people will die. Children will be hungry. Especially vulnerable communities—people of color, communities that have already been marginalized—will be lost. Species will be lost. There will be personal and collective suffering. It's true, and your heart needs to allow this to be felt and touched.

But in this darkest time, it's also true that this is only a chapter in the vast music of the spheres, that the sun returns. And like Seijo, we humans can also return. As we get quiet and listen to the fertile darkness, this return is only limited by our own heart. Meditation is the sweet oil that eases the hinge into the garden.

When we listen and reconnect, we tend our family. Trust that when you listen, you will know how. We can listen to the unheard voices.

We can touch and mend what's been broken. And with our hearts, we can bring peace to our lives, and care and peace across the world.

The practices that we do together—loving-kindness, compassion, deep listening and attention—they bring us back from exile to mystery and presence, to awe, and most importantly, to love.

So I thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 103

Meditation: Breath Love In, Breath Love Out

Jack Kornfield · 24 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield offers a simple yet profound practice that weaves together mindfulness of breathing with mettā (loving-kindness). Beginning with careful attention to bodily ease and stability, he guides practitioners to settle into embodied presence, noticing how the breath breathes itself without effort. The instruction emphasizes softening—the face, jaw, shoulders, belly, and heart—creating conditions for receptive awareness.*
>
> *The meditation introduces a beautiful synthesis: with each inhalation, one fills the entire body and being with loving-kindness for oneself; with each exhalation, one sends love outward to the whole world. Kornfield highlights the natural trust inherent in breathing—trusting that the breath will continue, that the earth supports us, and that mindful loving awareness can hold all experience. This trust becomes a foundation for the practice.*
>
> *The session culminates in a practice of deep listening, inviting practitioners to inquire what the body, heart, and spirit need for the seasons ahead. This reflective dimension transforms the meditation from mere relaxation into genuine self-understanding. Kornfield reminds us of the importance of pausing amid busyness—to stop, breathe with love, and listen. The practice serves as both a calming refuge and a means of accessing inner wisdom about what we truly need.*

Let us begin in the simplest way with some time for meditation.

If you would, let yourself find a way to sit or be where your body is stable, comfortable, and steady at ease. If you're in a chair, place your feet flat on the floor; if on a cushion, find a way that your body rests steadily on the earth.

For this time, meditation is an invitation to turn our attention to our own body, heart, and mind.

Let your eyes close gently. Take a couple of deeper breaths just to release whatever goes with that. Exhale to become more present. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body—your bottom, your legs, your feet—the weight of gravity, and how you can let go and be fully supported just where you are. The earth fully supports you, steady and stable. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to pay attention to this mysterious human body, this human incarnation and bodily form. Feel how it is breathing itself. You don't have to do anything. It breathes in the breath of the atmosphere and oxygen. Feel the breath wherever it's easy—the nostrils, the back of the throat, the chest or belly. If it helps, you can put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

With kind attention to each breath, invite a sense of ease. Breathing in and out with ease and calm. Breathing in with ease, breathing out calm and steady. The whole nervous system relaxes, stands down. Body and attention, heart and mind all come together, just feeling this breath.

Of course, there will be thoughts and emotions and sounds that arise as you sense each breath. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel how the breath breathes itself in the midst of it all.

Now add *mettā*, or loving-kindness, to each breath. Very simple. As the breath breathes in, fill your body with breath and kindness, loving-kindness. Let each breath in fill your whole body and being with loving-kindness for yourself. With each breath out, feel, sense, or imagine in any way you can that you're sending love out to the whole world. Breathing in love for your whole being, naturally and easily. Every breath out, sending love to the world. If the breath gets soft and quiet, let the love get soft and quiet as well.

Notice as you breathe—breathing in and out love—how there's a natural trust. A trust that after the breath breathes out, it will breathe in again, all of its own. After it breathes in, it breathes out all on its own. Trust the earth to hold you wherever you're seated. Trust the mindful, loving awareness to notice and hold it all—the breath, the love, all the waves of experience that come and go.

In the midst of it all, there is a stillness, a listening.

In this stillness, ask your body: What does my body want or need as we go through this new change of seasons? Now that you're present and quiet, let your body tell you. What do you need for the seasons ahead? What do you want?

Trust that you can know.

What does it need to be at its best? You can listen in this deep presence and stillness.

Just as you listen to the body, you can listen to your heart. As the seasons turn, as the year ahead begins—what does the heart want? What does it need to be at its best? You can know.

And in the same way, ask: What does my spirit need and want for the next season? What would serve? What would bring the best? You can know.

Take whatever gifts of understanding your body and heart and spirit offer. Let the quieting of your mind, the tending of the heart and breath, let this well-being stay with you—even after the bell invites your eyes to open.

So that was a simple practice of deep listening: quieting the mind, tending the breath, body and heart, and listening. Something we need these days. We get so busy. There's so much else going on. And just to pause, to stop, to breathe with love and listen.

CHAPTER 104

Q and A: Rekindle and Renew | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this intimate question-and-answer session from the end of 2020, Jack Kornfield guides his community through the challenges of practicing during pandemic isolation while discovering unexpected gifts. He addresses how to create meaningful intention-setting ceremonies when unable to gather physically, suggesting practitioners find their quiet place, listen deeply to what matters most, and write down their heartfelt vows—whether simple like "I vow to be kind" or more poetic expressions of purpose.*
>
> *A new meditator with ADD asks about bridging to retreat practice, and Jack offers encouragement about the surprising effectiveness of online retreats while honoring her discovery that breath meditation has been transformative for her life. Another practitioner raises the question of what beneficial changes from this difficult year might be worth preserving—the slowed pace, the deeper connections across distances, the inward reflection that isolation has fostered.*
>
> *The evening concludes with a touching story about iACT's work with Darfuri refugees, where teachers in refugee camps shared that mindfulness practice was their most valued teaching because it helped them live fully in the present rather than being trapped by traumatic pasts or uncertain futures. Jack invites the community to extend their practice of generosity and interconnection, reminding everyone that even in physical separation, we remain deeply connected and capable of meaningful action in the world.*

We have time for some questions or dialogue for a little bit, and then following this, I have one more story to tell you before we end this evening.

Linda, please go ahead.

"Hi, Jack. We're coming to the end of the year, a sad year for most of us as we've grieved for people we've known who've died, people around the world who we don't specifically know who died. Each year at the end of the year, we have an intention-setting ceremony around the solstice. I was wondering this year, in light of the fact that we won't be here together physically, what would you recommend for us to do? We usually have the red strings. How can we connect our intentions for the new year? We know there's going to be huge challenges during this winter, and yet we're all looking forward

to the fact that we're moving forward with President Biden. I'd like to know how we connect with each other and connect with our own intentions in light of the fact that we won't be together here at Spirit Rock. What would be your thoughts on that?"

Thank you. I love your question because in some way you're bringing in what we've done over many, many years, as you describe, on the last Monday night or the beginning of the new year where we'll tie a blessing cord and begin by meditating on what is our deepest intention and where do we find spiritual refuge or sustenance. The beautiful thing about your bringing it up and describing it is that we've done it many, many years, and now we know how to do it. Even you, in some way, were teaching people as you described it.

So now, instead of physically holding hands on the solstice or on New Year's Eve or whenever the time feels right to you, go to your sacred place, go to your quiet place, go to your meditation place. Take a cord if you like—a red cord, you might—or not, or a piece of paper. Quiet your own mind and heart. And then listen. If you were to set the best intention for the year ahead, like setting the compass of your heart—this is the direction that most matters to me, this is what I want to live—let yourself reflect in that way and then write it, that deep intention.

It might be as simple as a kind of vow: I vow to be kind, which we've talked about every year. Or it might be something more eloquent and poetic, which some people will find, like that beautiful poem from the school prayer from Diana Ackerman: "I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

Or maybe you want to walk in the woods and stand in front of a tree. I speak for the trees—the redwoods and the dogwoods and the maples and the oaks—and listen and say, what is it that I want to do to set this intention of the heart? Write it down and make a prayer.

That's the beautiful thing I've seen in our community and in people all over: that even though we're not together in a physical way, we're carrying something, as you said so clearly, and we have it. So thank you for bringing it in for all of us.

"Thank you."

"Hi, Jack. My name is Anne. I live in South Louisiana. I'm a new meditator, and I think I'm at a point in my practice where I would probably really benefit from a retreat, which is probably not going to happen anytime soon."

And I have ADD. I'm easily distracted. So I don't know if an online retreat would work for me. I'm wondering if you have any suggestions of how I can bridge to some of the gifts that come from being present at a retreat until the time when I can actually do one.

First of all, thank you, Anne, for the question. And I appreciate hearing a voice from Louisiana, even as I mentioned it, you know?

You mentioned the Cajun Navy, and it was just like, oh—

My people.

I'm not from here originally, but I've been here for almost twenty years, so I got here as quick as I could.

Your people, yes—you're some very fine people too.

Anyway, with ADD, because it's an interesting thing, it's difficult in some ways in this culture, but it also is a kind of gift because it allows you to be aware of things in a whole different way, not just that narrow kind of focus. What helps you? What serves you to quiet your nervous system and collect yourself? What have you found that's good for yourself?

As far as practice goes, I really prefer just focusing on the breath. And when I'm kind of in the zone with that, I feel like I can move to more of an open awareness kind of thing. Guided meditations aren't necessarily my jam. But I've really been diligent about it for the last year and it's really been quite life-changing. No more antidepressants. It's just been really transformative, and I really do feel like there's a lot more out there.

Fantastic, fantastic. By the way, those of you who are listening, we did not pay her for this. No, it's really beautiful to hear. And I know it because I've seen it over the years, how people think that meditation is some grim duty when in fact it's an invitation that can change your life. And I hear that from you so beautifully.

So let me talk about retreats for a moment, because your instinct to do a retreat is a wise one. What we found to our surprise is that online retreats kind of work. We were thinking, oh God, you know, the experience of being together in a collective place out in the country, such as Spirit Rock, is so powerful. But now we've done six or eight months of online retreats. And believe it or not, the experience that people report—and it's somewhat fewer hours, you can modulate it so it works for you—there is a kind of collective coming together of having that time that works even online.

And I suspect even for you, since your practice of breath works, even with the ADD you described, it could be quite effective. What I'd suggest is that you start simply—try a three-day retreat, for example, if your schedule allows, if not even a day-long. You can look online at Spirit Rock or other places like that. Insight LA has some online retreats that are very good. And there's an organization called Buddhist Geeks that offers a series of online retreats that are actually also quite good with some Spirit Rock teachers.

Look online and do it as an experiment. You experimented, you were brave enough—and I think wise enough, in some way intuitively—to find a meditation with the breath that worked for you. And clearly it has. I think you could trust yourself to try an online retreat, and it will surprise you. And if it does, let me know. Send me a message.

I surely will. Thank you.

Thank you. It's a pleasure.

that seismographs placed around the world to measure earthquakes have been detecting something remarkable: the vibrations caused by human activity on the earth have gone down. The earth is calming as we slow down. And this started me thinking about other good things that have happened this year. Friends I used to see occasionally—now we have Zoom chats once a month. We've had holiday gatherings that brought together people from around the country rather than just those who live nearby. So I wanted to ask your thoughts about the changes from this last year that you hope might continue, the good things that might come out of this time.

It's a moving and beautiful question. And in it, you've already started to provide the answer. Were we together in a room when you raised this question, you might describe how you're closer to certain friends around the world, how you connect in ways you weren't able to before. You get to live a life that's more measured, and the earth isn't shaking from so many cars and airplanes and people running around. That's the beneficial side of what's happened to us.

I saw it in my granddaughter's graduation. It was really sad—they didn't have a prom this past spring, didn't have the usual celebrations. Instead, all the students in her grade, some forty of them at this small school, each made a little video. Each one spoke. And it was so much more intimate than watching someone walk across a stage to receive a diploma. You saw each of these girls' faces, heard them say: This is my message. This is what I learned. This is what I care about in the world. It was surprisingly beautiful and intimate.

So I guess I have to ask you, since I don't have a room full of people: If you were to make a wish or a hope or a prayer for what we would keep from this time, what would it be?

"My wish would be that we keep this sense of things slowing down, of looking inward more—so that when we can again interact with each other, we carry that with us. That's what I would hope."

What a beautiful blessing to end the questions on, to carry that hope forward. The story tonight of Seijo coming back, reuniting in some deep way—what you've described from the pandemic has allowed us to reconnect in stillness, in simplicity. There's a beauty to it, something truly nourishing that you don't want us to lose, that we don't want to lose, that our practice supports us in holding.

I think of the words of the poet Derek Walcott, who tells us to fall in love with the world in spite of history—to step out of history and ideas and time, and actually come back to this world as it is, this marvelous world. So thank you to all who asked questions.

I have one more story to tell as a way to end our evening.

For almost twenty years at Spirit Rock, on my last teaching night before the holidays—Christmas, New Year, Hanukkah, whatever it might be—we would collect money in a basket for the soup kitchen in San Rafael, the nearest town to Spirit Rock. The B Street Soup Kitchen had been open for decades, and usually we'd fill a basket mostly with ones and fives, maybe fifteen hundred dollars in small bills. I would put them in a bag and go down to the soup kitchen, where I'd occasionally volunteered anyway, and bring this big bag of dollar bills. Sometimes a staff member from Spirit Rock would come with me. It was such a treat because of the outpouring of hearts from the three hundred people that night, all putting money in the basket.

Tonight, I was thinking about carrying on that spirit. Christina, who helps organize things at Spirit Rock, said she had bought a thousand cookies for everyone, the way we've done for celebratory nights in previous years. You'll have to take those cookies out of your own pantry now—they're waiting for you after the talk. But I thought it would still be beautiful to make an offering in this same spirit of falling in love with the world, of knowing we're not disconnected.

The organization I want to tell you about is a small one called iACT—small i, capital A-C-T. It describes itself, quite accurately, as a small but mighty anti-genocide group. It was started by a group of friends in Southern California who, after what happened in Rwanda, said: We can't sit by and let such things continue.

Their first and major project for the last fifteen years has been in the Darfur refugee camps. You know how it is with crises around the world—Darfur was a big thing in the news for a while, then supplanted by the Rohingya, by Syria, and on we could go. But the people there are still there.

What iACT has done is beautiful, and the way they work is part of the story. They went in and sat down with the women in these dusty, poor camps holding hundreds of thousands of people. They asked the women, in circles: What do you want? What do you need? This is very different from the normal NGO approach, the big organizations that come in with their programs to feed people or organize things, replicating what they do from one place to the next. iACT just went and sat with them and listened.

What the women said they wanted were two things: soccer, and kindergarten for their children.

When asked why, they said: We want soccer so our children know they're part of a bigger world, that they're not left out. If you look online at iACT, you'll see they helped form the Darfuri International Soccer Team.

All these kids who were playing barefoot received balls and eventually got shoes, going on to compete in an international competition as Darfuri United. And everybody in those camps heard about it and was rooting for them to even get one goal—which they did.

But the other thing they did was to create these little "ponds," as they called them, to begin educating the little children. That education also gave free time to the parents to be able to go collect firewood or whatever they needed. But more importantly, the mothers wanted it because it showed the children that they could learn and how important that was.

Trudy, my beloved wife, went to Africa to do some teaching in those camps. She has a history in, among many things, early childhood education—she ran a model school for part of Harvard Medical School. Early education is really one of the things she understood deeply, as well as being a mindfulness teacher. So she went to help educate the teachers in each of these little ponds or schools they had built.

The beautiful thing is that not only were they making schools for these young kids, but in the schools, the children would get one meal a day, which was a huge thing because many were undernourished. And equally importantly, the teachers were educated and had jobs and meaning. Now there are many of these ponds with many teachers and hundreds and hundreds of children.

When Trudy came back, she told me she had taught them all kinds of skills for helping children with early development—playful skills, mindful skills, attention practices, all the things she knew from her work in early education. She had trained the teachers both how to do that and how to center themselves with mindfulness and compassion practices, loving-kindness.

At the end, she asked them what their favorite thing had been. Was it the mindful games for the kids? Was it the various things she taught? To her surprise, they said it was mindfulness—it was the meditation.

She asked, "Why is that?"

And they said, "Well, our past was so terrible. Our villages were burned. Many of the people we knew, even in our own families, were killed. We had to run in the night, in the dark, across the desert with wild animals. Some of us escaped with our children and our lives. So we can't go back to that past. And we've been in these camps now for many years, and we don't know how much longer we'll be here, so it doesn't help us to think about the future in that way either. But what you taught us was to live fully in the present, where we are. It helps so much to ease our hearts, to be alive where we are. So thank you for training us in mindfulness."

My invitation for you tonight: make a contribution to IACT. I'll put in the first thousand dollars myself. I think we can get five thousand dollars and create a pond—a whole school with trained teachers, supporting children, giving them meals for a year. It's a huge thing that we're able to do together.

Somehow it feels like then we embrace brothers and sisters and children, women, people in another part of the world who are really also part of our world. It ends, in some small way, our sense of exile or impotence—that feeling of "what can we do?" Because we actually are connected. We can do things. We can share our blessings.

So I hope that you can support that. And more than that—I won't speak to you until the new year has come, sometime in January—I really hope you have blessed holidays. Wait in the darkness and listen in that fertile darkness, that beautiful darkness. Know that there's a light that you can trust, just as the sun will come back. There's a possibility, if we listen, that's only limited by our own hearts.

Thank you. Thank you for your kindness, your attention, your own meditation, your care, and for whatever donations you offer. But more than that, it's just wonderful to see you all. Imagine somehow that we were in a room sharing cookies and smiles and touching one another and writing our intentions. And in a way, we are—even in this fashion.

Thank you, and good night.

CHAPTER 105

Reconciliation

Jack Kornfield · 53 min

> *In this profound teaching, Jack Kornfield addresses one of humanity's most persistent challenges: how to navigate and heal conflict. Drawing from the Buddha's own experience with quarreling monks at the Gosīra Monastery, Kornfield illuminates a seven-step reconciliation process that remains remarkably relevant today: face-to-face speaking, deep listening, non-stubbornness, voluntary confession, decision by consensus, accepting the verdict, and 'covering mud with straw' through wise counsel.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together stories from his own difficult childhood, his encounters with Thích Nhất Hạnh, and contemporary examples of truth and reconciliation processes in South Africa, Maine, and North Carolina. He explores how the Buddha intervened to prevent war between the Kolyas and Sākyans, and shares moving accounts of transformation—from a conservative Saudi law student befriending a transgender asylum seeker, to meditation groups holding space for political differences.*
>
> *The talk offers practical wisdom for working with conflict at every level, from family disputes to national divisions. Kornfield emphasizes that conflict itself is natural and not inherently problematic; rather, what matters is our willingness to listen deeply, release our attachment to views, and recognize our shared humanity. He reminds us that within each of us lies the capacity for the brahmavihāras—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—the very qualities needed to transform hatred into understanding and estrangement into connection.*

So tonight, following that meditation, which touches me when I do it—I can feel the distance between different groups and the wish that they be reconciled—I'd like to speak about reconciliation.

It sounds like a Senate procedure at the moment, given what's going on in Washington, D.C. But there's a deeper meaning to it. And as I often say for these evening teachings, let yourself listen in a meditative way, to reflect, to notice if there's something that touches you, that seems important or right or truthful to you, that you already know in your heart, and let that be so. And if it doesn't seem right, just let it go. You become the wise one even as you listen.

It seems important to talk about reconciliation. At least it seemed that way to me as I was getting ready for this evening, because there's a lot of conflict out there. And conflict is natural. It's not even that it's a bad thing.

I remember working one day a week in a preschool, and a lot of the work there—alongside all the wonderful creativity of children—was also reconciliation, because the kids would get in conflict. "It's my toy!" "You had it too long, now it's my turn!" "You got a bigger cookie than I did!" So it starts early. It's because we have different needs and ideas and visions.

When they would really get upset and hit each other with blocks or bite one another, you get down on your knees, as I would, and you'd look at them and say, "How are you feeling? Angry? Frustrated? What's going on for you? What hurts or what's upset you?" And then you'd say, "You can use your words. Use your words."

I think maybe we should go to the capital of the US and some of the other great political centers in the world with big signs that say "Use your words," rather than all the other ways that people are trying to solve conflict.

But conflict is there. And it's even there in spiritual communities, as you might well know, because conflict really starts in the heart with our attachments and our needs and our desires.

This is particularly a divided time where there are different beliefs and views about the pandemic, or climate change, or racial and social justice, or how we go forward—certainly in the US as a country, but also in other parts of the world. We need to pause for a moment and reflect. With all these conflicts that are here with us, that surround us really, what is it that matters?

This is from Robert Kennedy, not long before he was assassinated. He was talking in 1968 about the state of the nation, when our prosperity was measured by the number of telephones and televisions in the household, by gross national product. He said this:

"Our Gross National Product does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It allows neither for the justice in our courts nor for the justice of our dealings with each other. The Gross National Product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

When I hear that, I think: What is it that really does matter to us? This vision is needed more than ever in the midst of our difficulties.

Some years ago, I was on a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh at the Green Gulch Zen Center. A small group of us who had been teachers or colleagues were with him. He was giving some teaching about smiling, as he did—that kind of half smile of the Buddha that he puts on—and talking about joy. I sat near him and listened. And as I did, I got very sad. I felt a kind of grief in my heart. I was confused because he was talking about being joyful and happy, and yet here I felt this great wave of grief.

We had lunch together, Thich Nhat Hanh and a few of us. And I asked him, in my confusion, "Thay, when you talked about joy, I felt this deep sorrow. And what I want to know is, is it mine? Or is it yours? Am I picking it up from you?"

He paused. His eyes got kind of moist, and he said, "Oh, it's mine." He said, "I've seen so much sorrow and suffering. That's why I must teach joy."

If you remember, when he first came to the US, he met Martin Luther King back in the 1960s and wrote this book, *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. He was one of the young Vietnamese leaders trying to bring peace in a divided country. He started the School of Youth for Social Services—clinics, rebuilding schools and things that had been bombed.

But when I heard the story, I also heard that many of the young people who came to work with him were killed, because both sides—the North and the South—considered people who were making peace traitors. And I began to think: what would it be like to bring young people together and know that some of them were going to die? And then I see Thich Nhat Hanh walking, holding the hands of children, which he always did in his walking meditation—the innocence of a new generation, the trust. He said, no matter what has happened, we need to water seeds of peace and joy.

And this was the same for the Buddha. Many, many years before, there was a war building up between the Koliyas and the Sakyas over water in a dry season—who would get the water from the river that divided their countries, not unlike these days. The Buddha went to the kings who were about to make battle and asked them some questions. He asked, "If I have a jar of water, is it precious?" And they said, "Yes." He said, "If I have a jar of water and it becomes blood, is it precious?" And they said, "Oh, all the more so." "Then why," he said, "would you fight over a jar of water, which we can find, when blood is so precious?" And in his own way, he was able to lead them to stop their movement toward battle and war.

So where are you in conflict in your life? What conflicts do you have? How do you navigate them? This is a human dilemma—how to solve this for thousands of generations, because our brain is wired with its negativity bias to look for things that are threatening. But yet some other part of us knows that there's another way. An organization started in the 1970s called "A Better Game Than War." It honored our competition and ambition and desire to compete with one another in all kinds of ways. Let's do this differently. Let's find another way. And for all the messiness and difficulty of politics, you could say that politics is ritualized warfare—that the Democrats and Republicans and so forth, they're not getting their tanks and guns and artillery to go take over the Capitol. It's done in a ritualized way, thankfully.

So part of what's needed is a kind of reconciliation. We have at Spirit Rock the Ethics and Reconciliation Council, which says: "Conflicts will inevitably arise within the Spirit Rock community. The health of our community is not measured by the presence or absence of conflict, as much as by our willingness to find effective, responsible, and compassionate means of resolving our interpersonal tensions—to attend to and learn from conflict in our daily lives. Without this intention, we will be lost in our views."

Buddhist conflict resolution is not based on good or bad, blame or guilt, winning and losing. It is based on addressing the suffering of all concerned and seeking reconciliation over estrangement, forgiveness over resentment.

Our Ethics and Reconciliation process actually comes from a long history. Many, many years ago, when you were much younger and in an earlier incarnation—many of you were around the Buddha, very possibly; you don't know, but it's possible, everything is so mysterious—in one of those years, the Buddha spent a rains retreat, the three months during the rainy season when the monks and nuns would pause and live in one place in the forest and not wander, to do deep meditation and also not to cause harm to beings in the rainy season when it's hard to move around. He was at the Gosira Monastery in a beautiful forest near other groups of monks and nuns.

And in this monastery, there arose conflict. The Buddha was staying at the edge of the Gosira Monastery, in a forest more or less nearby but not in the middle of the community. He heard a little about the conflict between the master of decorum and discipline—the Vinaya master—and the master of recitation, who would recite the Buddha's teachings so they would never be forgotten. They each accused the other of not following the rules and not doing things right—all the kinds of accusations that we all know and make against one another at certain times when we feel entitled or right or caught

up. Many took sides, and the conflict increased, although some refused to take sides. Over the weeks it grew, and the lay supporters became upset. Finally, they beseeched the monks in that monastery to call the Buddha from the forest nearby.

And so Nagita, the Buddha's attendant, who himself couldn't endure the situation, went and called the Buddha, who put on his outer robe and went to the meeting hall. They rang the bell for everyone to gather. The Buddha said, "Monks, please cease arguing. It is creating division. Return to your practice of loving-kindness. If we truly follow our practice, we will not become victims of pride and anger."

But his words fell on deaf ears. It got very quiet. And then one of the monks involved stood up and said, "Master, please don't involve yourself in this matter. Return and dwell peacefully in your meditation. This matter does not concern you."

We are adults and capable of resolving this on our own.

Dead silence followed these words. The Buddha stood up and left the hall. He went down into Kosambi for his alms food, and then he headed for the river, not telling anyone, not even Ananda, his attendant. He traveled to a far forest where he found a few monks living together in harmony like milk and water, and joined them for a time before eventually living all by himself for three months among the elephants and the other beings of the forest.

When the three monks living nearby asked why he was doing this, the Buddha remarked, "Sometimes it's more pleasant to live alone than with other people."

Now, of course, I'm sure you have all had those thoughts yourself at certain times. Sometimes it's actually best to step out. He told no one. He left.

After three months he returned, and as he came closer to the Gosira monastery, he asked, "What's happening?" He heard the story that the conflict had gotten worse, and that the lay disciples were upset with the monks and had said, "You continue to argue. You drove the Buddha away." Eventually they declared, "Unless you get over your pride and your arguments, we will no longer offer you food." So the monks quieted down and agreed to pause and meet together. Taking away the food made a difference, as you can imagine.

When the Buddha returned, he met with the wisest of those monks who were still there, who had not been involved in the conflict. They asked, "What should we do now? How do we reconcile them?" He said, "Bring the two groups close together, but still keep them separate." And then he began to outline a seven-step process of reconciliation.

The first step was called face-to-face speaking, where those who had been involved in the conflict were invited to sit surrounded by others in the community and by the elders, and to tell the truth as best as they could of what had happened. The face-to-face gathering in front of all was to avoid, said the Buddha, private conversations. Because those of you who watched *The Social Dilemma* and know the echo chambers of the internet and the online world understand that our private conversations and separating ourselves into groups can actually heighten and increase the hysteria and the level of fear and all of the emotions. So the first step is to come face to face. Don't talk privately outside. As the saying goes, it's hard to hate up close.

Once there was this gathering face to face, then there was the speaking of truth. The speaking of truth, said the Buddha, is so important. When he was asked at another time, "Why do you ordain both the untouchables and the high caste together? Don't you know that our tradition for a thousand years has placed people in different orders?" he replied, "That is simply tradition and it is not true. Every human being who is born has inherent dignity and value, none higher or lower." He said, "The truth is the truth, whether anyone believes it or not. Though a million people may believe the lie, it is still a lie. You must have the courage to live according to the truth." So there is the telling of truth, face to face with one another.

The second step is called deep listening—remembering with clarity what happened and then being willing to listen to the other side. This allows us to understand in a new way.

I remember when there was considerable conflict at our center on the east coast. The conflict arose between the teachers who were the most conservative and the teachers who were the most progressive—the wild-eyed radicals and the stick-in-the-mud conservative ones who wanted to keep things the way they were. There was a lot of unhappiness and words spoken behind people's backs, and fear and conflict about who we should follow.

We had the benefit of Robert Hall, one of the Spirit Rock teachers and a psychiatrist, who came to help with our meeting. At one point he said, "Let's have the two people who most represent these poles do something that we can learn from."

He first asked the person who was the most radical—a follower of Krishnamurti at certain points, who said we don't need tradition, we don't need to follow the old ways, we need to find truth exactly where we are, throw out a lot of the old things and just keep it true and simple—he asked them to please leave the room.

The twenty of us sat there without that person present. Robert said, "How is it without this firebrand wanting to change everything and make it all new and throw away the old?" People said there was a certain sigh of relief. We weren't getting that pressure. Robert said, "Well, is there anything else? What would you miss about them?" I spoke up and said, "Well, if they weren't here, I would have to become more of a revolutionary. But because they carry that spirit, I can relax a little and I don't have to be so involved in making the changes." Then they were brought back into the room. Others spoke as I did, seeing their value.

Then the most conservative person—who was afraid that the teachings of the Buddha would be lost or changed or sullied, that the depth wouldn't be maintained if we changed things in any meaningful or different way—was asked to leave. You have to understand that each of these teachers was very attached to their view and quite judgmental of the other and of the rest of us.

Robert said, "How is it without this person?" Oh, we relaxed. He's pretty judgmental of a lot of us for not doing things the traditional way completely. If he weren't here, we'd be much more at ease.

And then Robert said, well, what would you miss from him?

And others of us spoke up as I might. Oh my gosh, he really hews to the tradition. He recites the sutras. He tells us the original teachings and stories. If he wasn't here, I would have to do more of that. But because he's in the community, I can teach the way that I choose to.

He was brought back in the room and we looked at each other and learned that between us, there was a greater wisdom and a greater whole. That in fact, the mandala of who we were together—with conservatives and liberals—carried a kind of intelligence and wisdom we needed from one another.

So remembering with clarity, speaking with truth, speaking as an act of truth, and deep listening so we hear one another in a new way. Curiosity in your family: What are you grateful for? What would you do if you had no fear? What conflicts have you solved in your life? How did you do it? How are you managing to cope with all these changes? These are the kind of questions you can ask someone, even someone you feel is very different than yourself. And they will answer in a way that lets you connect outside of that conflict, deeper than that conflict.

And the third step, face to face, deep listening, is non-stubbornness. We get so attached to our views. Here's the Buddha saying, "How could one have conflict with the wise ones who do not grasp at any views? For one is free from views. There are no ties and no suffering. But those who grasp after views and opinions, they wander about the world annoying other people."

I like to think of this as a little bit of humor from the Buddha as well. They wander about the world annoying people.

But non-stubbornness is the next step, the Buddha said. Bring these monks together, deep listening, and then let go of their views. Invite the quality of non-stubbornness for them and for you.

And then the fourth step is called voluntary confession. How painful it is to reflect: How have I contributed to this conflict? Because in some ways we may have all contributed to the conflicts we look at.

And I think of this extraordinary book entitled *A Human Being Died That Night* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who is a South African activist and psychologist and part of the Truth and Reconciliation process. She decided to go into the maximum security prison where they had locked up Eugene de Kock, who is known as the commander of the death squads during apartheid, who murdered and tortured many people and ordered others to do it. She said, I need to understand how someone could do this.

And she spent a year going into his cell, at first terrified, just talking and listening and recording. And on one day he came to say, when she asked where he was, "I think that I lost. It's a feeling of deep loss. Well, the first thing that goes is innocence. I mean, there's no more fairy tales and Bambi. That's gone. We killed a lot of people and they killed some of ours. We fought for nothing. We fought each other basically, eventually for nothing. We could all have been alive having a beer. The politicians—if we could put all the politicians in the front lines with their families and grandparents and grandchildren, if they're in the front lines, I don't think we will ever have war again. I think it's educated people, very educated people who sit in parliament and decide about war. So I'm confused. I'm very confused and I'm just very tired."

And she wrote about how, through a year of dialogue, she who had lost family members and seen so much suffering had come to understand him and in her own way had offered forgiveness. When she heard his voluntary confession of how he too had seen this and wished that he had not done what he did. How do I contribute?

And then the next step was decision by consensus. That is to allow the group to be quiet for a time and to reflect and to listen to one another and come to an agreement: yes, this is how we can move forward. Again, a very deep listening.

And then the next step is called accepting the verdict. And that is really the willingness to change. You know this in the work of addictions, where nobody can help someone who's addicted, an alcoholic or a drug addict. My name is Jack and I'm a Buddhist.

And to accept the verdict is really to say, "All right, I have contributed as well, and now the consensus has come that we must move forward, and I accept too."

And then finally, the last step is called covering mud with straw. There they were—the Buddha and senior monks and this whole group of community that had been in conflict. And in the middle are especially the two masters who started the conflict, having gone through face to face, telling the story, deep listening, non-stubbornness, voluntary confession of how I've contributed, decision by consensus, accepting the verdict.

And then covering mud with straw means that you sit and listen to the elders who are there, who will give some teachings as the Buddha did: Practice loving kindness to overcome anger. It has the capacity to bring happiness to others without demanding anything in return. Practice compassion to overcome cruelty. Compassion has the capacity to remove the suffering of others without expecting anything in return. Practice sympathetic joy to overcome hatred. Sympathetic joy arises when one rejoices in the happiness of others and wishes others well. Practice non-attachment to overcome prejudice. Non-attachment is the way of looking at things with open and equal mind and equanimity. This is because that is. That is because this is. Myself and others are not separate. Do not reject one thing only to chase after another.

And when he spoke about resting in loving kindness and compassion with a deep understanding, the community changed.

I remember sitting with Thich Nhat Hanh after he had his major stroke. It was the last day and we did an early morning meditation. He was here in San Francisco, brought by Mark Benioff of Salesforce with a group of monks and nuns to have medical care for six months. And though he couldn't speak—his stroke had taken away his language—he sat in his wheelchair and we all sat together.

At the end, the bell rang. He was about to board a plane later that day and return to Plum Village in France. He looked around the room at the twenty of us sitting with him, and it was as if he looked with two different eyes. One eye acknowledged each person who was there. He nodded to them without words—to myself, to others. We could feel

our connection over the years in that moment, absolutely present and deep. And the other eye was looking to eternity. You could feel a vastness of his presence, a sense of timelessness, the fact that yes, he knew his body was toward the end of his life. He could see all of that with one eye, and with the other he could be totally present and loving.

This is the vision of an elder covering mud with straw—loving each person as they are, where they are, and seeing the vastness of things as well.

So you listen to this story of the Buddha and the monks in conflict. You know how guys are—it happens. Reflect for a moment: where are you in the story? If you were to find yourself in the story, are you like the Buddha in that moment where no one will listen to you? Or are you more caught like the stubborn monks? Maybe you're the disgusted lay people who don't want to pay taxes anymore and don't want to support these people in conflict and feed them. Maybe you're the one who didn't take sides. Are you one who listens deeply? Are you willing to cover mud with straw? We all have these in our lives.

I grew up in a very painful, violent family because my father was a tyrant and a wife beater and batterer, and at times brutal with his children—not always, but completely unpredictable and terrible. I tried to be the peacemaker in the family. Now you can see I do it for a living. At times it was a little bit helpful, but mostly not. I just listened, but they didn't listen to me.

Then I remember my twin brother, who was a lot bigger. I was this skinny kid and he played football. We were both fourteen—I was still pretty skinny and he had sort of bulked up—and my father was getting violent with my mother and hit her. My twin brother strode over and stood up, kind of showed his young band of muscles, and raised his hand and said, "I'm going to beat you," to my father. You could see the rage in my twin brother. And my father backed off because my brother really would have just pounced on him. After that time—standing up to the bully—my father did not lay a hand on my mother. He could still be verbally abusive, but he stopped beating her and harming her.

So it also says sometimes maybe you need to stand up to the bully. Maybe so. But more than anything, it talks about how the fact is that there is grief and pain in every one of our lives.

And that we carry a legacy—whether in our families, where we might have had a beautiful, peaceful family, or in our human family. We're all in this together.

And reconciliation is hard. It's hard in our families.

I think of the woman who came to see me, someone I work with, because she was in this terrible divorce where her ex-husband had hired the most vicious lawyer to try to keep all the money and take the children from her, making up stories of her unfaithfulness and her being crazy. I said to her, "Get yourself a really good lawyer," which she did. The father was trying to turn her children against her, as happens in these terrible divorces.

And she came in one day to see me and said, "With all these terrible things happening, I realized that in the midst of them all, I will not turn my children against their father, no matter what he does. I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children." I felt like she was one of those wise elders at the end of the reconciliation process.

A teacher in one of the online groups—we now have so many meditation groups—talked about her online Dharma group and how she imagined, because she was relatively liberal and she looked out at the demographic of who comes to meditation, that there wouldn't be Trump supporters in the group. But of course she was wrong, because the gates to the Dharma open and welcome everyone—liberals and conservatives and libertarians. They welcome all beings.

You could hear that in the story of Robert Hall and our meeting, how we actually need to listen to each other. We each carry something important.

During the first meetings of this group, the teacher unfortunately said something unsupportive of Donald Trump. And one of the group members, who was already uncertain whether he wanted to be in the group and had not showed up a couple of times, said, "Let me request that we don't discuss politics here, because I'm a supporter of Donald Trump and I need this to be a safe space."

So this woman, the teacher, and the group all immediately agreed. And by not talking politics, we kept this man safe. In the process, we've gotten to understand his suffering and see why he thinks the way he does. It's been so valuable. If we stick together, keeping on the path of awareness, we can see each other more clearly, each in our own time. Maybe we're avoiding something by not discussing thorny issues, but it feels right to do in this moment.

And so on this day in our group, we have a Trump supporter who is a war veteran, a gun owner, and a warm and wonderful and wounded person. We are continuing on as a Sangha. We've held him and each other with gentleness and acceptance, and he in

turn has become closer to each of us—much more than he ever intended. He was very skeptical of us and felt very much an outsider, for good reason. But now the trust is there among us.

You can hear this and feel the value and benefit in reconciliation. We need to do this in our families, in our work with one another, and we need to do this nationally.

I've been talking to various friends—one of whom is a federal judge—about the fact that we need a truth and reconciliation process in the USA. It doesn't fix things, but it's a start. If you could go to Montgomery, Alabama, and see the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, you would see the names of thousands of victims of lynching and terror over the years—people killed by mobs.

The model of truth and reconciliation from South Africa has now been adopted in thirty-five countries. And we're starting to do it locally.

There was a process done in Greensboro, North Carolina. Reverend Nelson Johnson was a co-founder of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation. He said, "We were organizers then, active organizers in the textile industry and in communities throughout North Carolina. We chose to have a march through the historic Black community. Nine carloads of Klan Nazis drove into the march with a cache of weapons and fired on the group. Five people were killed; I was wounded. I knew then that this couldn't happen without police collusion. We fought it from the very beginning. Two juries did not convict the Klan or find anyone guilty of anything. So at the twentieth anniversary of this tragedy, we mulled over what to do and resolved to build a truth process over forty years of persistent work."

They got people to come in who remembered and tell the story, and the entire community heard what had really happened—all the things that had been buried. It made the community come together and say, "Yes, we lived this way, and we will not live this way in the future."

There's been a truth and reconciliation process in Maine as well. Part of this process was started by Denise Altvater, who is a Wabanaki native, an indigenous person, and the founder of the Maine State Child Truth and Reconciliation Process—because the state of Maine removed more children from native families than any other state by percentage.

A third of children were taken from their parents. She wrote, "The state came with a station wagon and took myself and my five sisters out of our home. They put all our belongings in garbage bags. My mother was away shopping. She wasn't home. And we did not see her again for four years. They forbid us to speak our language. They forbid us to

talk of our tradition. So when they drove us away from the reservation, they drove me away from the only thing I'd known my whole life. And for four years, the foster parents tortured us, and the state left us there."

These are terrible stories. But without telling the truth of the native genocide, of the history of slavery, of the lynchings, of the way that we've treated one another, we can't move forward. Because we're still fighting the Civil War, as if slavery wasn't bad and it didn't happen, as if we can pass over the native genocide.

But it's not the end of the story. As the Buddha says, "Look how he beat me, abused me, threw me down, robbed me. Continue to live with such thoughts and you live in hate. Look how he beat me, abused me, threw me down, robbed me. Abandon these thoughts and live in love. In this world, hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law."

We can do something different. We can learn from one another. We may, if we are fortunate, be able to create a national process of reconciliation, to listen to one another. As Longfellow said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemy, we would see sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." If we could really listen and hear the pain and fear that's carried by each one, if we could suspend our prejudice, and in some way be willing to follow this reconciliation process, cover mud with straw, be not so stubborn.

I read, I think last time or the time before, this story from my daughter Caroline's organization, Oasis, which provides legal services and support for LGBT people from around the world whose lives are in danger. She shared this account: "One of our clients and volunteers and staff told me this story. We had a young law student who was here in Berkeley but came from Saudi Arabia. We'll call her Miriam. She volunteered to help us with asylum cases, and she volunteered to help Elena, a transgender woman from El Salvador, attend her asylum interview—despite Miriam's own conflicted views around transgender and sexual orientation and all the things she'd heard about gender identity, the kind of prejudice that she had absorbed in her community. She was professional, courteous, and respectful as she prepared the client for the hearing, but she didn't engage in small talk during the long ride over to what would be one of the most difficult days in Elena's life.

"Miriam and Elena sat silently in the sterile waiting room. The asylum officer was running late. One hour, then two hours went by. Finally, Elena pulled out her phone and showed Miriam a photo of her Pomeranian. Miriam's face lit up. She had a Pomeranian too, named Ali. They traded photos and stories, soon moving on to their love of jewel-

studded high heels and Louis Vuitton purses. Miriam taught Elena about the abaya she was wearing. By the time the officer was ready, four hours later, Elena's fear had receded and Miriam was whispering reassuring cheers as they walked into the room.

"Standing outside the subway station at the end of the day, they held hands and each thanked one another. Elena won asylum, escaping almost certain death if she returned to El Salvador. And Miriam, the next year, returned to her life in Saudi Arabia. They would likely never meet again."

Our hearts cannot help but be moved as we see how each had a deep impact on the other's life. In these times of darkness, we must remember that when we're able to sit down and listen to one another, to see the world through another's eyes and believe in our common humanity, there is hope.

This isn't easy stuff. Mahatma Gandhi said, "True love is not for the faint-hearted." And the Bhagavad Gita says, "If you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can return love for hatred."

On another night, perhaps I'll talk about forgiveness and how it works. It doesn't mean you condone things that cause suffering. Your first step is to do whatever you can to prevent yourself or others from continuing to suffer. But then there's a deep process of forgiveness that's possible. And we all know this because we've all needed forgiveness as well.

Nelson Mandela said, "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember that you have within you the great heart of wisdom and understanding, the great heart of compassion, that this is possible for you.

And as it says in the Majjhima Nikāya, the words of the Buddha: "Others will be cruel—I will be kind. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will be greedy and hoard—I will be generous. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will speak falsehoods—I will speak truth. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will be envious—I will be appreciative. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will be fraudulent—I will be honest. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will be arrogant—I will be open-minded. Thus I will incline the heart. Others will be harsh—I will establish compassion. Thus I will incline the heart. Others may lack wisdom—I will see what is wise and live with it. Thus I will incline my heart."

You carry within you the seeds of awakening, your own Buddha nature. What seeds will you water? You carry the seeds that the world needs more than anything—your ability to stop, to pause and listen deeply. To not cling to views, but to hear the hearts of others, their pain and their conflict and their difficulty. To live with non-stubbornness. To realize that we are a family, that we're in it together: the family of humans, the family of beings on this earth.

You are of the vastness. Consciousness and loving awareness is your true nature, born into this body. It is who you really are. And even in times of conflict, which will come again and again and are natural, remember your own dignity and nobility. Remember the capacity of your heart to be brave, as the Bhagavad Gita says—to be heroic. See with the eyes of love and compassion and tenderness. Stand up to protect those who need to be protected, including yourself, but do so as Dr. Martin Luther King said: with only the weapons of love, with only the weapons of the heart itself.

You meditate. You listen. You hear these teachings. Some of them may resonate for you—I hope so. But more than anything, you carry the lamp and you carry beauty into the world.

I honor you for it.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 106

Meditation: Reconciliation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 31 min

> *In this Monday Night class from Spirit Rock, Jack Kornfield offers a meditation that moves from breath awareness into a profound practice of reconciliation. The session begins with establishing embodied presence through mindful, loving awareness of the breath, using the calming phrases suggested by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Kornfield guides practitioners to acknowledge strong mental waves—thoughts, emotions, memories—with gentle naming and a bow of recognition before returning to the breath's anchor.*
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> *The meditation then opens into a contemplation on reconciliation, which Kornfield describes as both prayer and heart reflection. Moving systematically through relationships—from mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, partners and lovers, to sisters and brothers—the practice extends outward to encompass employers and employees, communities, genders, races, religions, nations, and ultimately all beings of every form. This structure, which Kornfield credits to colleague Philip Moffitt, transforms personal meditation into a vision of universal healing.*
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> *Kornfield frames reconciliation as something healthy, wise, courageous, and necessary—particularly relevant given that families, where we are most vulnerable, are often where hurt occurs most easily. The teaching suggests that finding reconciliation within family becomes the foundation for living it in the wider world. This practice offers a contemplative approach to mettā (loving-kindness) that specifically addresses estrangement and division, making it especially meaningful for our times.*

Good evening and hi everybody, all you people, many beloveds behind the screens. I know you're there. Some of your faces I can see and some I know are listening, and it's an honor and a pleasure to gather as we do here for this Monday night class.

Monday night class has been ongoing now for 36 years—every week for more than three decades—and now I've been teaching more or less every month while other wonderful teachers have stepped in on the other Mondays.

If you're not part of or haven't been part of programs at Spirit Rock: Spirit Rock has been founded on this beautiful piece of land that we invite you to visit, by a whole community of people who are dedicated to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, that are central to the Buddhist teachings but that are really part of all wise spiritual life.

Whatever brings you to this class, whatever your background or caste or race or creed or orientation or ability, whatever human incarnation you are in—and there are many, many kinds—they all are welcome. The Dharma gates open and welcome you with respect and love. So thank you for coming.

And thank you also to the Spirit Rock staff, to Jesse and Christina. In another week, there'll be a class or a daylong with Nikki Mirghafori on living fully and dying fearlessly. If you go on the Spirit Rock website, there's all kinds of other classes and programs that you may find serve you, especially in this pandemic time.

What we do on Monday nights is really quite simple. We meditate for a time with a little bit of guidance as we will have tonight, take a break after for five minutes or so to relax and stretch, and then there's usually a set of teachings as there will be tonight, often followed by dialogue or questions and answers.

So with all of that now, let's take some time to tune into ourselves, to our own bodies and hearts and minds.

Find yourself a way to sit that's stable and present. We'll probably sit for 25 minutes, something like that. Feet flat on the floor if you're in a chair or a cushion. Find a way that your body can rest on the earth with a sense of groundedness and stability and ease.

When you're ready, let your eyes close gently, and using a mindful loving awareness, begin to check in and notice the experience in your body and heart and mind. What's alive is always here and now.

You might start by taking two or three deep breaths, and with each one releasing what you can of obvious tension. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find the simple upright. Allow the shoulders to relax and the arms and hands to rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the cushion, the chair—how gravity holds you onto the earth and how you can let go and be fully supported. You can relax and be held by the earth just where you are.

Let your belly be soft and your breath natural. Let your heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice how your body is breathing itself. You don't have to do anything or change it, but you'll feel how it breathes itself. Coolness in the nostrils, more swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. In the midst of all the things that you notice as you get quiet, feel how the breath breathes itself in the middle of them all.

Tonight we're starting with the mindful, loving awareness of breath as a way to center and stabilize attention—just here, with this breath, in this moment. As you breathe in and out naturally, noticed with loving awareness. If it's helpful, you can use the words that Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh suggested of "ease" or "calm," so that each breath you feel is an invitation to calm, to ease, to settle.

Of course, there will be thoughts and emotions. There'll be sounds and other experiences that come in as you pay attention to the breath. Let these other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. And you rest in the middle—this breath, ease and calm.

Come back to the breath quite gently when you notice the attention has wandered. Like training the puppy: sit, stay. Again and again, you return to the breath kindly, just as you would be with a puppy. Sit, stay.

Little by little, let the attention settle. This breath, with ease. This breath, receive with loving awareness.

If it's hard to sense the breath when it gets soft, let your attention get soft. Or put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you continue to sense the breath—its rising and falling, its flowing in and out—periodically from all the background waves, something strong will arise: a memory or a plan, an emotion of longing or fear, love or worry, or perhaps a loud sound.

When a strong wave arises and pulls you away from the breath, pulls your attention, let go of the breath for a moment and acknowledge that big wave by naming it gently. Sad, sad. Or excited, excited. Or worried, worried. Planning, planning. Hearing. Almost as if you could bow to it. You acknowledge it kindly: "Oh, sadness. Planning mind. Remembering."

And once you've acknowledged it with a name, notice what happens to it. Planning mind. Sadness, sadness. Let it open a little bit. Let it show itself just a little. And then, "Thank you." You can say thank you and come back to your breath.

So now you're aware of your breath, but also when some strong interruption arises—which will happen every few breaths, or three breaths, or ten breaths—you acknowledge it with loving awareness. "Oh, this is excitement. This is sadness." Feel it, bow to it, say thank you, and then come back to the breath.

You rest in the middle. You sit like a Buddha under your own tree of enlightenment, resting with the ever-changing breath, breathing with the air of the world—gently, calmly. In a centered and steady way, you can acknowledge the waves that arise when they come, naming them gently: "Oh yes, I see you. Thank you." Let them pass. And you're steady in the midst of it all.

Now, as you sit quietly, I'd like to invite you to another dimension of meditation: a practice of reconciliation. I'll read some teachings aloud for you, and you can bring into your own mind and heart the benefits of reconciliation and healing for all those who've grown estranged and set apart.

We begin with family, because family is where we are most vulnerable and can most easily be hurt. And yet it's the place where we need to find reconciliation so we can then live it in the rest of the world. Take your time and reflect as you hear these words. Let them express the tender possibility that love between the people who are named, the beings who are named, can find reconciliation.

May all mothers and sons be reconciled.

May all mothers and daughters be reconciled.

May all fathers and sons be reconciled.

May all fathers and daughters be reconciled.

May all husbands and wives be reconciled.

May all partners and lovers be reconciled.

May all sisters and brothers be reconciled.

May all family members be reconciled.

May all employees and employers be reconciled.

May all community members be reconciled.

May all friends be reconciled.

May all women be reconciled.

May all men be reconciled.

May all men and women be reconciled.

And all of non-binary gender be reconciled.

May all races be reconciled.

May all religions be reconciled.

May all nations be reconciled.

May all people be reconciled.

May all creatures be reconciled.

And may all beings of every form be reconciled.

Feel this meditation as a prayer, as a deep heart reflection, as a possibility, a yearning, a vision. And may our lives lead to wise and healthy and beautiful reconciliation among all beings, all peoples.

May it be so.

I love this practice. This form of it I received from a colleague many of you know, Philip Moffitt. And as I recite it across all these different areas, it turns my heart and my vision toward a possibility of reconciliation that feels healthy and wise and courageous —and necessary.

Come back in five minutes to listen.

May it be so.

This talk was offered at a meditation retreat. For more teachings, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 107

Q and A: Reconciliation

Jack Kornfield · 29 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Jack Kornfield responds to three practitioners grappling with real-world conflicts and the desire to bring healing to their relationships and communities. A school wellness specialist shares her heartbreak over struggling students, a practitioner asks about facilitating reconciliation between estranged friends, and a mindfulness teacher seeks guidance on supporting couples in crisis.*
>
> *Through guided inquiry and somatic awareness practices, Kornfield demonstrates how to work skillfully with grief, exhaustion, and the longing to help others. He emphasizes the importance of acknowledging suffering directly, listening deeply rather than rushing to fix, and recognizing where we carry emotional weight in our bodies. Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on reconciliation from "Old Path White Cloud" and invoking Nelson Mandela's resilience through 27 years of imprisonment, he offers both practical frameworks and profound perspective.*
>
> *The teaching illuminates essential principles for those called to help others: the necessity of tending to one's own heart first, the distinction between loving people and trying to fix them, and the importance of acting from integrity without attachment to outcomes. Kornfield reminds listeners that while we cannot control whether others choose reconciliation, we can embody steady-heartedness and become zones of peace. The session closes with an invitation to trust the seeds of compassion we carry—our Buddha nature—as we move through a world hungry for healing.*

I'm lighter than when I came tonight, so I'm looking to you for some wisdom. I work at a public high school in a wellness center, and I've been doing a great job for about eleven months, but my students are struggling and I'm becoming heartbroken for them. I'm a helper type, as I suspect everyone is on this call, and I'm running out of help to give, it feels like. I thought I would see if you had advice for me to give to them.

And are you a teacher? I didn't catch what your role was.

I'm an intake specialist in a wellness center, and I'm a mindfulness teacher. A student advocate.

Oh, yes. Doctor, take your own medicine, I see.

You know, I think the first thing is just to acknowledge that this is a lot of suffering. And if you're a young person, a year is like a huge chunk of your entire life. So my experience with young people is that they're really grieving. They've lost so much. And they need to have this acknowledged. The first thing to say is, this is suffering, and you are experiencing it. It's grief. And not to cover it over.

But then I have a question for you. What have you found that is most helpful to your students? What have you learned?

A lot of what you talked about tonight, which is listening. Listening is what they need.

So you listen to them and they can express their tears and their sorrow and their anger and their frustration. All they're experiencing—loss. And you can say, this is one of the great losses of your life. You'll look back and say you lived through this. But really, you're listening. What else helps?

Inviting them to name their experience. Even though we have lessons we have to cover, we're setting everything aside. What's inside you? What's happening?

That's really beautiful, because we have our ideas of what's needed, but right now what's needed is much more the listening of the heart—just what you said—putting some of the lessons aside, because they're not learning them anyway, you said. So this is the chance to get real, and to also teach them that it's okay to be real, that part of school is to learn to do this. So that helps them: listening, telling the truth, not being fixed on the plan. All right, so what's helped you? Now you know how to help them. Turn the spotlight back.

Well, my job's rewarding. It's very rewarding. They're grateful. They're beautiful. I'm impressed by them.

I'm proud of them. I'm trying to be as resilient as I see they are.

But you don't feel it right now.

I don't feel it.

So close your eyes for a second. There's been so much loss in this, and it's so difficult. Where do you carry the loss in your body? The tears for what you've tried to do so hard?

Right in there—upper chest, throat.

What does it feel like? Warm? Cool? What's its shape?

It feels tight.

Tightness. Is there a temperature?

Yes—hot. Hot and tight.

Hot and tight. So let it be there, and bring your loving awareness to the pain that it carries. This is really how you carry the grief in your body. And let it open. Let it actually expand and get bigger. Let it fill as much of your whole body, or the room, if it wants. You can name it—grief, tears, pain, whatever it is. Fire. And notice what happens as you give it space. Does it get bigger? Does it intensify? Expand?

It feels like it's softening.

So notice that. Notice the softening. You're allowing it, and it's softening. What does it want you to understand?

I think that I won't always be this way.

So feel that. Feel that you've paid attention and given it space. It's softened. And now it's speaking to your heart and saying, "It's not always going to be this way." And listen—how does that resonate? How does that affect your body?

It feels right. It feels centered.

Yes. So feel the centeredness and the rightness now. Oh, nobly born—this is your return to your Buddha nature. It doesn't mean you don't carry a deep grief in your body and heart for all the loss, for these young people. It doesn't mean you don't get exhausted. But there's something in you that's inexhaustible, that knows this is not the end of the story, that it does have an end. You can soften and carry.

Again, Nelson Mandela: "Don't judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." You're in it with Nelson now. You're in it for the long haul. And just think about it—twenty-seven years on Robben Island was half of his whole life. Like your students, it feels that way—up and down. And yes, you carry something, and you're learning to do it with them. They buoy you up and you buoy them up, and of course you go through those times. How are you feeling?

Just filled with love. Thank you.

Thank you so much. Thank you, Casey. A pleasure.

Hey, Jack. Thank you so much for tonight's teaching. Personally, it's felt quite relevant. I've really noticed an uptick in the dehumanizing language that my own friends are using in relation to people on the other side of the political aisle. And I've also personally experienced a great reconciliation with a friend who I hadn't spoken with in over a

decade. So it feels timely. I have a great desire to bring some of this reconciliation practice to bear on my own life. But I also realize that could be dangerous without the right grounding. So I wondered if you thought it appropriate for me to take the framework you showed us and start applying it to maybe small, low-level conflicts in my own personal community—or if not, if there were places you would point me to where I could gain training and grounding?

First of all, it's a beautiful question. And I can hear the goodness of your own heart and psyche—to say, "I resonate with this. I know this, I've seen it. And I want to know if I can help others." So I just want to honor that goodness that comes out of you in asking the question. Can you give an example of a kind of place you would want to bring this into?

There are two places that come to mind. I have two really good friends who have gotten into such a terrible conflict that they are no longer speaking, their families are no longer speaking. They've devolved into text messages—even step one, face to face, is not part of the picture. And then I have another situation where two family members have grown estranged over divergent political views, such that I don't know if they'll ever talk to each other. It just seems to me such a loss.

I'm moved by what you say. I think I would start with the friends if you're going to do it. Because quite honestly, family is almost too hard. Even the Buddha and Jesus had trouble with their families when they went home. So you have to understand that's the steep path—maybe you should go to the summit first, then come back.

There is actually a description of this process if you would like to read it. One place you can find it is in Thich Nhat Hanh's book called *Old Path White Cloud*. It's a great big fat book that is a biography of the Buddha. Somewhere in the middle, in chapter forty-seven—these short chapters—is the whole description of this practice and this process. What I understand is that Thich Nhat Hanh's community—they have Deer Park in Southern California and so forth—they actually use this process. When I was in the monastery, I became part of one of these processes.

So I think first you might want to educate yourself more. Read that, and then look at Deer Park. Once you've done it, then you might ask your friends if they're interested—because if they are, it's possible. If they're not... the Buddha, when he was called in, said, "Okay, I can help you." And they said, "No, we don't want this." So he got up and he left. He was called the teacher of those who can be taught. You have to find out. They may be so caught in it for now. But you also might be able to speak to them and say, "Here's something I've learned."

I'd like to ask you to close your eyes for a moment and get quiet. As you do, first I'd like you to picture these two friends and notice what you feel inside. Keeping your eyes closed, tell me what it's like for you.

I've shared some really good memories with each of them. So I almost felt like a tickle, like I want to laugh a little bit. It feels warm when I think about that.

So there's a warmth and a tingle and almost a laugh, and a memory of all these good things that you've shared with each of them. As you feel all of this, also now bring in: what is your heart's best intention in wanting to work with them? What is your intention?

I think there are some simple truths that they each have that if they just spoke and listened to each other... my intention for them is that they could just listen to each other. I've seen this so much with my parents, how terrible it can be when there isn't just the willingness to listen.

So your intention is that they listen to each other. And what's your intention for yourself? What do you hope for, Christian?

I want to, as we say in Brooklyn, walk the walk. I want to embody what it means to be a person who can listen and who can speak truth. I want to cultivate that—not just for myself, but for my deep, close relationships.

So now imagine that you could say what you just told me to each of them separately. "This is what I want. I want to embody this. I want to carry this." Imagine that you could say that to them, no matter whether they choose to do it or not. This is your heart speaking.

"How does it feel as you picture that?"

"The word that came up was integrity. I feel sort of solid and aligned."

"So feel the quality of solid and aligned—that integrity and the deep love that is there. 'I want to live with this love. I want people to come together.' And obviously there's joy and affection and love that you have for each of them. Now imagine that you're able to say this to them, however they're going to respond. You're going to start by talking about what matters to you, not to them. Feel that integrity and the strength that you have, the love. And finally, let yourself be peaceful with it, because they may or may not listen. Imagine that you can say this out of love, without expectation, and see how that lands in you."

"I think I can do that."

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel good. I feel rested, almost."

"Next time I'll get you an application for graduate school in mediation, but we'll work a step at a time here. No, I love your intention, because you love them both. I could feel it. And you've had so much joy and pleasure with one another. That deep intention that you carry—if you can express it... So learn a little bit. Look at Thich Nhat Hanh's community, read these things, and play with it. You don't need to be a professional. You don't need to go to graduate school and become a mediator. You can be somebody who loves these people and say, 'Listen, there's a simple process. Maybe you want to try some of it.' And let them listen."

"Thank you. I really wish you well."

"Thank you so much, Jack."

"One more. Seema, would you like to speak?"

"Sure."

"Go ahead, dear."

"Hi, Jack. I have asked you a question before, and I noticed someone else is raising her hand. So maybe I can ask my question later because I feel..."

"Well, you're here. The karma, the fates, the universe has put us together. We're having our moment. It's fine. Please ask."

"The first aspiration that I had to come to this teaching tonight was related to the political situation that we're in. But today I was presented with two different conflicts in two sets of people that is, I believe, rooted in the same type of challenge. And I was asked for suggestions that I could make. I need to be skillful—that's my intention. Where do you draw the line between self-compassion and compassion for the others? Because in both these sets of couples, I felt like they have exhausted everything in them, and yet I could see the spark, the flame of some hope. But it was just exhausting, and I need to get some guidance..."

"Are you doing this as a friend, or as a therapist or professional?"

"A mindfulness teacher."

"You're a mindfulness teacher, yes. So when I used to work with couples as a psychologist, especially if they were really in a lot of conflict—I remember one time this couple came in, and they were in very heated conflict."

And they came in and I said, "Well, let's first let you find a way to sit so that you feel safe with one another." Immediately the woman got up and walked out the door and slammed it. Then she cracked the door open and I could see one little eye peeking in. She said, "Okay, I feel safe out here." That's how difficult it was.

In some way, you have to start where you are with people. I'm not sure that it's your job as a mindfulness teacher to do couples work, quite honestly. If you choose to, that's okay, but it's not really in the curriculum to be the couple. It's a whole different training. If you love these people and feel that you can listen to them, and they're willing, they're amenable, of course you can do it. But what I'm hearing from you is that they've kind of worn you out.

"Yeah, it just happened right before this session. During the meditation, they just came up because one of them is pregnant, she's having a C-section on Friday, and there is betrayal going on. It's just very unsettling."

All right, so close your eyes for a moment and feel what you're feeling. Even as you tell this, there's actually both upset—maybe some grief, maybe some anger at how they're behaving. What are the emotions storming around in you?

"Weariness. Compassion."

You have compassion, but you've got more than compassion. You're a little bit fed up and you're worried.

"I am looking at the whole—in the person who has betrayed..."

Yes. You shake your head. What comes out when you shake your head? What would come out?

"Because it's easy to accuse someone for something he has done. But when I get to the root, I have compassion for him."

All right, so you have both. But how are you feeling about this? Do you want to continue being in this role of trying to help these stubborn people?

"Yes."

All right, so what would now go into your heart? What state could you bring that would most serve them?

"Steady heart. Patience."

Is it hard for you to be with them? No? So you can bring a steady heart.

Now I want you to imagine that you have somebody to help you—the most amazing being. It could be Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, or Mother Mary, or Buddha, whoever it is. Imagine that they could appear and be with you, come right next to you and say, "I'm going to help you." See who wants to come. Who arrives?

"Should I name her?"

Yeah.

"My mentor in my program, Trish."

Okay, your mentor. She's wise and she's strong.

So now imagine that you and she can hold hands and you go in. And as you said, you're full of compassion and you're steady. They may listen to you and they may not, but your role is to be that centered, steady heart that says, "You know, there's another way." You hold it in your heart and they can feel it from you. They feel how peaceful and strong you are. And then you ask them: do they want this?

How does that feel to you?

They came to me because they wanted it.

That you will have to find out. Because you can't fix people. But you can love them. And you can be in their presence. And you can even say, "I love you both. And I'm steady with you. And I want you to find a way if you can." And then you'll see. You can't fix them, but you can love them.

Is it possible for me to just help them widen the aperture of their view?

You can invite them. You can invite them to see how many couples have struggled like they have, that they're not alone, that right now, this very day on January 25th, there are 485,000 couples across America alone who are in the same sort of situation—and that this is human. It's not just them, but it's us. And that the ones who are wise hold it with some tenderness and say, "All right, we can get through this."

How are you doing?

And now I'm dealing with the wanting-to-be-perfect me.

Want to do it perfectly? Oh, well, yeah. You might as well let that one go. You do it as good as you can. We're all perfectly human, you know, and you'll do some and some will be beneficial and some won't, but you do the best you can. If you do it with love in the end—if that's your intention—that carries almost everything that matters.

I wish you well. I wish them well. I wish all the 485,362 couples who are struggling well, especially under COVID. It's not that easy. That book that a friend, Esther Perel, wrote—a New York Times bestseller, one of her areas of expertise is around sexuality—it's called *Mating in Captivity*, about marriage in some way. But really, we're now under COVID, we're all in captivity in some way. But like Nelson Mandela discovered, they can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And when you carry that spirit of love that you have and steadiness, and you can say, "You know, this is human what you're going through, and it's possible to get through it."

So I thank you, Seema. I thank you to everyone who listened.

Let's just take thirty seconds to be quiet together.

What I heard from each of you who spoke—and you represent so many more of us—is this longing for reconciliation, to actually be an agent of love and compassion for ourselves and for those around. Trust this. This is your good heart and your Buddha nature. Sometimes you may need to walk away for a time, as the Buddha did. But then you come back. And you bring your gifts back from your steadiness of your meditation, your peaceful time.

Oh nobly born, you carry the seeds that the world needs. Trust them. Make your heart a zone of peace and compassion and steadiness as you move through the world.

Thank you all.

CHAPTER 108

Seeing the World with the Heart of Wisdom

Jack Kornfield · 51 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Jack Kornfield invites us to remember our fundamental nature as consciousness itself—what his teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows." Drawing from his years of practice in Thai forest monasteries, Kornfield shares how Ajahn Chah's teacher, Ajahn Mun, redirected practitioners from focusing on meditation experiences to recognizing the awareness in which all experiences arise.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together wisdom stories from diverse traditions—Zen masters Suzuki Roshi and Rinzai, poets Mary Oliver and Emily Dickinson, peacemakers like Vinoba Bhave and A.T. Ariyaratne—to illuminate how resting in loving awareness transforms our relationship with life's inevitable paradoxes: joy and sorrow, birth and death, praise and blame. He reflects on the Buddhist teaching that happiness comes not from possessing but from gratitude and connection, embodying the brahmavihāras of compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā).*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for these challenging times: taking death as an advisor, practicing deep listening, trusting intuition, and recognizing our interdependence. Kornfield reminds us that we are "neck deep in grace" and that our birthright is dignity, compassion, and freedom of heart. Through meditation and the cultivation of loving awareness, we can respond to the world's suffering with both tenderness and spacious perspective, becoming what the texts call "nobly born"—sons and daughters of the awakened ones who remember who they really are.*

Welcome back.

I was just having the vision of so many people being together in our beautiful Dharma Hall at Spirit Rock. And now we have this imagined and visioned magnificent Dharma Hall in our hearts, even though we can't be together embodied in that way. We can still be together, connected somehow in the teachings, in mindfulness and compassion. We can be together somehow in our listening and our caring.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about seeing the world with the eyes of wisdom—or maybe seeing the world with the heart of wisdom.

The Buddhist texts begin in some verses with the phrase, "Oh nobly born, oh you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, of the Buddhas, remember who you really are." And this talk is a reminder of this for you. Wisdom stories—some I've

told before that I love, some new ones—all of them pointing to this amazing human capacity to be awake. Wisdom with perspective, spaciousness, understanding, steadiness, responsiveness, tenderness, humor, ease. The eyes of wisdom to see the world as it is, with a graciousness and an understanding, a full presence to both enter the world and yet...

As Mary Oliver, the great poet, says: "To live in this world, you must do three things. Love what is mortal, hold it against your bones knowing your life depends on it. And when the time comes to let it go, to let it go." And in other lines she writes, "For years and years, I struggled just to love my life. And then the butterfly spoke, 'Don't love your life too much,' as she rose weightless in the wind."

To love what is mortal and hold it against your bones, knowing your life depends on it. And then when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. This is our dance, our human incarnation—to tend and love that which is ephemeral.

Now we all are living through what is so obviously a time of great challenges. The challenge of the pandemic, which has affected so many people, especially in the communities of poverty and communities of color and in countries that don't get the vaccine. I just had my vaccine. I was very honored to be able to receive one as someone who's seventy-five and older. And I also thought about all those people who need it and haven't been able to get it yet.

It's a time of upheaval in the world, as there has been in Burma and in Darfur again—not to speak of Washington, D.C. It's a time of the continuing selling of arms and the nuclear arms race, which continues to grow in some way. It's a time of continuing struggle to find racial justice and economic justice after centuries of racism. It's a time where we're all seeking to find health, even amidst the pandemic.

I remember speaking with my mother, who died about ten years ago, when we were going through another hard time. She said, "You know, Jackie"—she called me by my name when I was little—"I've lived through a lot. My father came home from the trenches in World War I. I lived through the Great Depression. I lived through World War II. We know how to do this," she said. "We know how to go through hard times."

Someone said no one knows the age of humanity, but we're old enough to know better. It's really obvious when we hear and sense the struggles that we share as a human race. The outer developments which are so spectacular—the computers and biotechnology and nanotechnology, the smartphones that have a portal into all the information across the globe—no amount of technology is going to stop continuing warfare, con-

tinuing racism, continuing climate destruction, all the things we struggle with, continuing tribalism. It's time for us as human beings to match the outer development that's so remarkable with the inner development of heart.

But how do we do this? How do we hold all these struggles? What kind of perspective and wisdom allows us to open beyond our reactivity, beyond being caught in it?

My teacher Ajahn Chah described an important moment when he'd been practicing in the jungles of Thailand and Laos for years, in caves and out with the tigers. These were the days when it really was still very much jungles, although much has been logged off and cut down by now, fifty, sixty, seventy years later. He went to see the greatest master of the day on the border of Laos, another Ajahn—Master Ajahn Mun—and told him about all his meditation experiences, his insights, his struggles, the visions, the bliss and rapture, the understandings.

The meditation master shook his head and said, "You've missed the point, Chah. Those are just experiences." He said, "There's only one question: To whom do they happen? Who is it that's knowing?" He said, "Turn your attention from the images and the experiences and all that you've described back to the one who knows, to the awareness itself"—as we did in our meditation—as if you're in a movie theater and there's the war movie and the romantic comedy and the documentary and all those things that bring life onto the screen with all their emotions. And then you turn your attention back and see the light projected onto the screen.

In meditation, we can turn our attention from the experience back to become what Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows."

This is who you are, consciousness itself. Whether it's in Zen or Advaita or Dzogchen or all the great spiritual traditions of the East—and not just there, but the spiritual traditions of the world—they all point us back to the mystery of consciousness.

And this isn't some esoteric understanding meant for a small group of people. We know this in our bones. Remember the poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez called "Yo No Soy Yo":

I am not I. I am this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk. The one who forgives sweet when I hate. The one who takes a walk when I am indoors. The one who will remain standing when I die.

We all know somehow this sense that we're not just the experiences that happen—that who we are is this mysterious witness of it all. And it happens in shock sometimes, at an accident or a diagnosis or the death of someone around us, and all of a sudden the gates between the worlds open and the sense of mystery arises. We're so wedded to our ordinary identity, and then it becomes shaken. And we go, "Oh, who am I really?"

We are the consciousness. We are part of this great dance of life that the Buddha called the star at dawn, flash of lightning in a summer cloud, echo, a rainbow, a dream—all the forms appear and disappear. And underneath it, when we get silent, we become the witness itself. And then our heart becomes tender and open to the mystery.

My friend Roger Walsh, a great meditator and meditation teacher, at one point decided, as a scholar, to read through the entire Encyclopedia of World Religions—many volumes, from Ahura Mazda all the way to Zoroaster. I asked him what he learned from it. Roger said, "What I learned is that each of these religions had a story: the origin of life, the nature of good and evil, how we might behave, what created this world." He said, "And when I read one story after another, I realized that they were all stories that we place upon the mystery."

When we stop, even in these troubled times—and especially in these troubled times—and sense the mystery, our heart can become quiet and more tender. Even the suffering, of which there is a great deal, is held in a different light. Like Zen Master Issa, who wrote this poem:

Dew evaporates and all our world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.

How ephemeral it all is. But now listen to this poem again, for he wrote it on the death of his seven-year-old daughter: *Dew evaporates and all our world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.*

So we become the one who knows. We become the wise and loving witness of it all. As we did in our meditation, we become the loving awareness that sees the ephemeral nature of life with tenderness.

But then what? I'm thinking of sitting with kids in the back of the car after we've had some great adventure, and then they speak up and say, "Now what? Now what?"

So now you remember that you are consciousness itself. You have the perspective of loving awareness. You become the wise witness. And now what?

Remember that the word for mindfulness in Sanskrit and Pali is *sati*, but it's a compound word: *sati sampajañña*, which means mindful presence and mindful response. It has two parts. So with wisdom, with the spaciousness of loving awareness, this vast perspective, we then also become responsive, steady, tender. From this vastness, we see the world and we love it. We become that loving awareness.

With this perspective, we're able to see the cycles of life. I think of my dear friend Ari Ariyaratne, who is the Gandhi, the sage, the Martin Luther King of Sri Lanka—an extraordinary being who started Sarvodaya, which got people in half the villages of the country to help one another build schools and dig wells and support one another and feed one another. Amazing things. And he intervened in the middle of the civil war that was so terrible.

In the middle of that civil war, when the Norwegians were trying to broker a peace treaty, he called all of his followers to the great temple of Anuradhapura, the oldest temple in Sri Lanka, and 650,000 people came. He stood up and said, "It's taken us 500 years to get into this trouble of the civil war."

500 years of conflict between the Buddhists and the Hindus and the Muslims, and 400 years of colonial oppression, and 200 years of the rich part of the island separated from the poor parts.

"So to end this," he said, "I offer the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan. Ten years of a ceasefire. Twenty years of rebuilding roads and schools. Fifty years to learn each other's language and religion. One hundred years of economic development so everyone is included. And then we have a council and see how we're doing. And we do it again and again. And after 500 years, we can make this the island of peace."

When I heard this, I could have wept. I got to tell it to the Dalai Lama at one point when I was teaching at a time he was also present, because I knew how much he carries for so long in the tragedy of Tibet. This is the wisdom of an elder who is not worried about the next election cycle or having people in a focus group. However long it takes—if we've been in conflict this long, we head in the right direction. We open our hearts and we do what's necessary. This is the wisdom of the one who knows.

The one who knows also sees with compassion the ones who forget. Anne Wilson Schaaf wrote, "The best adjusted person in modern society is the person who's not dead and not alive—just numb, a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to do any work for the society. But if you're fully alive, you're constantly saying no to many of the painful processes of the society: the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water and eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it's in the in-

terest of modern consumer society to promote those things that take the edge off, that keep us busy with our fixes, keep us slightly numbed out and zombie-like. In this way, the whole of modern consumer society functions as an addict."

We see how the world around us can put us to sleep. Noam Chomsky says, "All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there's constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to continue to consume."

But this is not who we really are, and the one who knows recognizes this. The one who knows recognizes that a modern society can feed all of its children, that we can educate everyone in our culture, that a wealthy modern society can provide healthcare for all. The one who knows recognizes there is another possibility.

The one who knows sees that life is short. "What will you do with your one precious and wild life?" asked Mary Oliver. Carlos Castaneda's teacher Don Juan suggested we take death as an advisor, keeping death over our left shoulder. Every morning in the monasteries where I lived, it would be dark and we would gather together and sit in meditation before the breaking of dawn, before going out with our alms bowls. We'd sit in silence with candles and then do our morning chanting. And part of our chanting was a reminder: Life is short. Death will come. It is all evanescent. What matters then? Did I love well? Did I live fully?

How could we not love everyone? I remember being in a very big hospital on the East Coast when my twin brother was dying of blood cancer. I spent months visiting him, as did my other three brothers. We are all quite close and love one another. In the cancer ward where he was getting his chemotherapy and his multiple treatments, where others were all struggling, periodically throughout every hour—every fifteen minutes or so—there would be a tinkling of bells over the sound system. Finally, I asked a nurse, "What's that?" She smiled and said, "That's a new baby that was just born."

Today, 375,000 bell-tinkling new babies are born. How could we not love them? How could we not look at each one—whatever color, shape, or form, whatever their eyes and their hair and their skin—and see that they are human beings coming into this wild human incarnation? How could we not love them equally, every one of them?

"In this short life that lasts only an hour, how much, how little, is in our power," wrote Emily Dickinson. If you had a few days left to live, who would you call? What would you say or do? Why are you waiting, my friends?

The one who knows recognizes that life is short. The one who knows sees human incarnation as a realm of paradox and rests in the vastness that is our true nature. Suffering, like rain, falls on the just and the unjust. Human incarnation—form itself coming out of emptiness—is duality.

Form and emptiness, light and dark, gain and loss, birth and death, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, fame and shame, praise and blame—the worldly winds. They change, you know they do: praise and blame, joy and sorrow. In human incarnation, we have the ocean of tears and the unbearable beauty, and they cannot be separated and taken apart.

As the great Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, that master writer, put it: "If only it were all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

This is the realm of paradox. Joy and sorrow, praise and blame. And every breath—the Jain monks wear a little mask, now that everybody in America is invited to wear one, so that they don't kill any little bugs with their breath. But that's only the ones you can see. There are one trillion little bugs that live in your gut, in your digestive tract—a trillion of them. There are two billion bacteria on your skin. In one spoonful of soil, there's more life—protozoa and algae and fungus and millions of bacteria—than on whole planets in our solar system. This is the realm of birth and death, of existence and non-existence, of gain and loss, of beginnings and endings.

The one who knows sees this paradox and relaxes. As Zen Master Suzuki said to his students, "You're perfect just the way you are"—which was great news to them. You're perfect just as you are. "And there's still room for improvement," he went on. This is us. There's beauty, perfection, and room for improvement.

The one who knows sees how much we need each other. You know this, and this grows with the practice of compassion that we have. As my teacher and friend Maha Ghosananda said, "This can either be a dog-eat-dog world, or we can feed each other." No one can do it alone. No one can exist alone. We so need one another.

Liu Xiaobo, who was a prominent Chinese dissident, was jailed and tortured for ten years for speaking out about the injustices in his community, for writing about the things that were harming people. To be released from his torture, all he had to do was sign a paper saying his thinking had been wrong, that he now saw it another way. And

every time the paper was brought to him, he looked at it and then he said, "I could see the faces of the villagers in my community and all they'd suffered. And I realized I couldn't sign it. They were with me. They are with me."

And I think of Aung San Suu Kyi, now under house arrest again. She fell from grace when she did not stand up against the military for what they were doing to the Rohingya. But I understand—I understood then and much more now—how she was trying to keep the military from taking over the entire country, bending in some way, hoping that she could keep democracy. Sadly, that didn't work. But the one who knows understands we're in this together. We need one another. We're part of one another.

I was sitting with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh at a teaching one day for a small group of us who were teachers. And someone raised their hand and said, "Thay, is there such a thing as group karma?" And he asked them, "What makes you ask?" And the student said, "Well, I wonder about the war, the American war in Vietnam. So many millions of pounds of bombs, so many people who were killed. And I wonder about the Vietnamese. Do they have a particular karma that made the war happen to them?" And he got very quiet and maybe a little bit sad. And he looked up and he said, "The war didn't happen to them. It happened to all of us."

The one who knows sees this—that our lives are entwined with all the beasts, as Chief Seattle said, for what happens to the beasts happens to mankind.

A story for you, from Karen Ziegler: "When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a Veterans Administration hospital. The work was a challenge in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married."

I am a lesbian. My growing discomfort with the question seemed only to egg them on. Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since he had been touched with kindness.

Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle. Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward where patients could become argumentative, even aggressive. I sometimes didn't feel safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained.

Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a threatening manner. Just as I was starting to worry, an equally large Vietnam vet with dementia quietly came between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere and stood nearby in silence. I felt safe. I'm retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

The one who knows in you sees that we are in this together, how much we need each other. This is compassion.

The one who knows also understands happiness—that happiness doesn't come from possessing. We can't possess, but we can love. And it grows, like the practice we do of mudita, of shared joy.

Maya Angelou writes, "It's a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before."

And we can have the experience of gratitude. It's not happiness that makes us grateful; it's gratitude that makes us happy. There's a story of Socrates, who liked to go to the market. His students asked him, "Why do you like to go to the market?" He laughed and said, "I like to go to see all the things I'm happy without."

It's not how much you get, it's how much you give. And joy is not a luxury, and it's not a privilege. It's an expression of love. It's the heart saying, "Yes, I belong here"—amidst all, amidst the tears and the injustice and the beauty and the hope.

From an Inuit poet, Uvavnuk, who writes: "The great sea has set me in motion, set me adrift, moving me like a weed in a river. The sky and the strong wind have moved the spirit inside me till I am carried away trembling with joy."

Joy is not a luxury or a privilege. André Gide called it a moral obligation. It is gratitude that makes us happy. And the one who knows understands that happiness is not based on things—it's the happiness beyond conditions.

The one who knows in us sees with the eyes of the beloved. And you know, in almost every indigenous and traditional culture, the terms of endearment are family terms. To everyone they meet: "Oh brother, oh sister." In all these countries that I've traveled in—in Africa and Asia and various places—the men hold hands. It's a beautiful thing to see. They're not so frightened and homophobic as the men in this country have become. "Oh, brother. Oh, sister. Auntie." Auntie Kamala Harris. Uncle Donald. You know, we all have wild uncles. We know this. "Grandfather." We see one another in this way, as part of our family.

I remember the story of some peacemakers, anti-nuclear peacemakers, who had been doing large actions and demonstrations in England during a period when there was a buildup of nuclear weapons and nuclear missiles. Finally, after many demonstrations and pleas, they got to meet with the commanding general—not just of the British nuclear forces, but of the NATO nuclear forces. And when they met with him, he wondered what they would say.

They certainly thought about it for a long time before they sat down with him, worried about the explosions that could wipe away an entire city or population. And when they sat down with him, they said, "It must feel difficult. It must feel like a great weight to have to carry responsibility for all these nuclear weapons." And they said it with real care and compassion—imagine having that responsibility. And because they could feel into his responsibility and his weight and his heart, they could see with the eyes of the beloved. He responded and he said, "Yes, it's a terrible weight." And they began a genuine conversation. What can we do that makes a difference?

To see with the eyes of the beloved brings both equanimity, or peace, and love. The one who knows is an embodiment of the practices of compassion, of mudita and joy, and of equanimity itself.

Zen master Rinzai says, "Followers of the way, you who are here listening to the Dharma, when you awaken, you become a person who enters fire without being burned, goes into water without being drowned, and plays about in the three deepest hells as if in a fairground, entering the world of hungry ghosts and dumb animals without being molested by them. Why is this so? Because there's nothing such a person dislikes. Even if you love the sacred, dislike the worldly conflicts—you will go on floating and sinking in the ocean of birth and death. Fears and confusion arise depending on the heart. If the heart is open and quieted, why need you fear anything in the world? Do not tire yourselves making up discriminations of higher or lower, of good and bad, and quite naturally of itself you will live into the way."

This is the radical hospitality of the one who knows—not rushing around but stopping to look in the eyes of another, resting in vastness, inner stillness, deep listening. There's a kind of intuition that comes when we quiet ourselves, like Gandhi taking a day a week in silence in the middle of all the activities and all the demonstrations and all the marches and all the ways of trying to end the British colonization of India. Every week he would take a day in silence to listen to his intuition.

I think of Ruth Dennison, my colleague and teacher, who had a ticket on one of the 9/11 planes and was headed to the airport, and her intuition said, "This is not the plane you should be on." If we listen, if we listen with the eyes of the beloved, if we open our hearts, if we trust our intuition, something beautiful can come of it.

I remember again the story of Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba was the most prominent disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. And after Gandhiji was assassinated, Vinoba was heart-stricken and the whole Gandhian movement fell apart. But half a year or a year later, people began to gather and say, "We need to resume our work. We need to resume the care of making a new nation, one that's built on care for all beings who are here, for justice, for things that were at least in their minds, even if they weren't yet able to fulfill them." And they asked Vinoba to lead the meeting. And he said, "No, no, I don't want to be the leader. Gandhi is gone. We must do something different." But they pressed him. "Please, Vinobhaji, you must come."

So finally he agreed. He said, "I will come if you postpone it for six months." And he walked from where he was on one side of the Indian subcontinent all the way to the other side to the meeting. He said, "I want to walk. And I want to listen."

He came to a village that was very poor, a rural village. And most of the farmers were untouchables, outcasts who were working the land of the richest people in the village. He sat under the great tree in the center of the village, and in the spirit of Gandhi said, "I come with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi himself, with whom I worked. Let me listen to you." And they laid out their great plight. And they said, "We have nothing. If only we each had a little bit of land, we could grow food for our families and for the village."

And as Vinobhaji listened to all of them and reminded them of the great generosity and heart of Gandhi who'd been assassinated, with tears, one of the richest men in the village stood up and said, "How many acres do they need?" There were twelve families there, five acres each—sixty acres. He said, "I have land. In honor of Mahatma Gandhi, I will give them sixty acres, five acres each."

And Vinobhaji said, "No, go home, talk with your family first before you give this away." And in the morning they reassembled, and the man said, "Yes, I wish to offer." And the villagers joyfully received it.

Then Vinoba took his walking stick and went to the next village and sat under the tree in the center of the gathering place and heard similar stories from the poorest in the village. He told the story of what happened in the prior village in the spirit of Gandhi, how this man had stood up. And Vinoba, as he told the story, looked around and said, "How many of you are struggling?"

And there were thirty families. He said, so how much land would you need? One hundred fifty acres. And inspired by the story that Vinoba told, another of the rich men of the village stood up and said, in honor of Gandhiji, I will give one hundred fifty acres.

There was a celebration, and Vinoba kept walking. By the end, when he reached the conference, he had gathered 2,800 acres for the poorest villagers and began what was called the Bhoodan Land Reform Movement, where he and his colleagues walked on foot for several years across every province in India and collected fourteen million acres of land gifted to the poorest of the poor in honor of Gandhiji. It was the biggest land transfer in the history of the modern world, all done as offerings—but all done because he was the one who knows. He rested in that heart that said, let me listen with the eyes of the beloved, to see them all with the heart of compassion and listen deeply.

And when we do, we become guided. When we rest in the one who knows, there's a kind of grace that comes if we can quiet ourselves.

Oh nobly born, say the Buddhist texts again, remember who you really are. Remember you have within you the great heart of a Buddha. This is your true nature, born into you. You are unique. No one in all the billions of galaxies has ever been quite like you.

And among the sages that I've seen, the grandmothers and grandfathers—some of them are merchants and some of them are healers, some of them are shamans, some of them are politicians, some of them are courtesans when you read the old texts—in every form, whoever you are, there is a fundamental nobility and dignity. You are consciousness itself, wending your way through this mysterious incarnation.

And the story says that you've wandered, parched and hungry, searching for fulfillment in the heart. And yet in this old story, the one who loves you sewed into your robes a jewel. You, the richest person on earth, have been going around begging. If only you look in the hem of your garment, say the Sufi masters, the jewel has been sewn in there for your benefit.

Oh nobly born, you are consciousness. You are loving awareness itself. Remember this. Yes, there is suffering. Yes, there's grief and death. Yes, there's injustice. There's also dignity and trust and a freedom of heart. And it is exactly where you are to be found. It's found in a prison cell when you're Nelson Mandela. It's found in the work you have, whatever it happens to be.

I remember a friend of mine asking a great Indian guru about grace. He was sitting at the ashram of this great teacher who was talking on and on about grace. And he said to the guru, I don't feel grace. What is this grace? What is this grace you're talking about?

The guru got quiet and looked at him with great loving eyes and said, you—you who could have an airplane ticket to fly to India, you who are studying and listening to the teachings of thousands of years to open your heart, you who have education, you who have the blessing of a human body—you are asking about grace? You are neck deep in grace.

Take a pause, a breath. Your birthright is that which cannot be broken, unshaken. Your birthright is dignity, compassion, and freedom of heart. It is here where you are.

Zen Master Suzuki Roshi says, when you realize the fact that everything changes and find your composure in it, there you find yourself in Nirvana. The abode of peace, the indestructible, the timeless. My teacher Buddhadasa called it the great public health measure: everyday Nirvana.

Take the time to meditate. Do the practices of compassion, of joy, of equanimity. Practice being the sky of awareness. Rest in vastness. Be the loving awareness itself. And listen. And you will know what to do.

I end with a poem from Brian Andreas called "Waiting for Signs":

I used to wait for a sign, she said, before I did anything. Then one night I had a dream and an angel in black tights came to me and said, you can start any time now.

And then I asked, "Is this a sign?" And the angel started laughing, and I woke up smiling. Now I think the whole world is filled with signs—but if there's no laughter, I know they're not for me.

"Holy, holy, holy," says Allen Ginsberg. Holy, holy, holy—all of it. The world is holy. The body is holy. Holy the typewriter that writes this poem. Holy the voice, the skyscrapers, the cafeterias. Holy the mysterious river of tears under the streets. Holy the vast lamb of the middle class and the crazy shepherds of rebellion. Holy San Francisco

and New York and Peoria and Paris and Tangiers. Holy Moscow and Istanbul. Holy time and eternity. Holy the desert and the sea and the visions. Holy mercy and charity and faith. Holy our bodies. Holy our suffering. Holy magnanimity—the super extra brilliant, intelligent kindness of the soul.

Take a breath.

What a journey we're on, dear ones. What a journey.

Remember who you are. Oh nobly born, you are loving awareness, born into this body. And even though you may forget, in but a moment you can come back. You can remember.

CHAPTER 109

Meditation: Loving Awareness

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a progressive journey from embodied presence to the recognition of awareness itself. Beginning with settling into the body, releasing tension, and establishing a dignified yet relaxed posture, the practice unfolds through careful attention to the breath as an anchor of stability and calm.*
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> *The meditation includes a contemplative poem by Bridget Lowry that beautifully captures the essence of simply sitting with all aspects of life—our questioning, our clarity, our shared sorrow, and the blazing energy of being alive. Kornfield then guides practitioners to observe how thoughts, sounds, sensations, and emotions rise and fall like waves of the ocean, teaching the gentle art of acknowledging and naming experiences as they appear in consciousness.*
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> *The heart of this practice involves a fundamental shift in identification—from being caught in the content of experience to recognizing oneself as the loving awareness that knows all experience. Kornfield invites practitioners to understand that they are not merely the body, the breath, or the passing waves of thought and feeling, but rather the vast consciousness that receives them all. This teaching points to our true home: the spacious, loving awareness that remains still and present amidst all arising and passing phenomena. The practice offers a direct path to remembering who we truly are beyond the temporary conditions of body and mind.*

Make yourself comfortable and let's do some meditation practice together.

If you're in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Sit upright with some sense of dignity and graciousness or ease. If you're on a cushion or a bench, however you sit, let yourself rest fully and stably on the earth.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently. Perhaps take a couple of deep breaths to help you release what you're carrying and just be here and now.

Our practice is of mindfulness, of mindful loving awareness. Begin to notice as you come into the reality of the present the experiences of your body. If there are any areas of tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck.

Find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body from gravity, the heaviness in your buttocks and feet, and sense how the earth completely supports you. Just where you are, you can relax. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now take your seat with loving awareness in this embodied presence.

I begin with a poem I love from Bridget Lowry:

In the strange early evening half light we sit. In the cloudiness of our questioning we sit. In our madness and our clarity we sit. In the midst of too much to do, we sit. In the warm arms of our shared sorrow, we sit. In community and in loneliness, we sit. In the blazing energy of being alive, we sit. Here with the song of the coyotes and the frogs, here with the rippling of breezes across the grasses. Here with cobwebs and clouds and the wayfaring moon and the dusty road upon us. Us in the sound and the sound in us. Us in the world and the world in us.

As you settle, hearing these words and taking your seat in the midst of all things, let yourself sense the mystery of your body's breathing, how it breathes itself. Feel it as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to sense your breath, you can put one hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand, and relax with each breath that you sense.

Breathing in and out, invite a sense of ease and calm to grow with each breath. As you sense this life breath that breathes you so beautifully, with the ocean of air shared by all beings, calm and relax with each breath. Gently opening.

Yes, there will be sounds in the background. There will be thoughts and bodily sensations, images and emotions. Let all these experiences of sensations and sounds, thoughts and feelings rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Feel how the breath continues to breathe itself gently in the midst of them all.

Steady yourself in the breath. Relax into it. Trust it. Let it be your home. Return gently to this breath, this moment. When the attention goes off to other places, acknowledge gently and then come back. This breath.

Let the mind quiet. Let the body come into deeper ease as you breathe. Feel the breath breathing itself in the midst of it all.

As you feel the breath, you can let your mindful loving awareness also acknowledge the waves of the ocean that rise and fall around the breath—thoughts that come and go, sounds, strong sensations. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean, and sense yourself as stillness in the midst, feeling the breath breathe itself.

And when a strong wave of experience pulls your attention from the breath, as if to bow to it, you can acknowledge it, name it gently. Oh, planning, planning mind. Remembering. Sadness, sadness. Excitement. Longing. Tingling, itching. Or sounds—hearing.

And as you name that experience that arises in awareness—hearing, hearing; sad, sad; planning, planning—notice how the wave rises, is felt or received in the space of loving awareness, and then passes away.

Steadying yourself with the breath now invites you to open further and become the field of loving awareness. You are the consciousness that hears these words and that hears the silence between the words. You are the awareness that knows the breath. You are the loving awareness that knows the sensations of body and the moods and emotions that rise and fall like waves of the ocean or clouds.

You are not the body with all its sensations. You are not the breath that comes and goes on its own. You're not the waves of sounds and thoughts and feelings. You are the consciousness, the loving awareness itself. You are the awareness that receives them all.

Rest in this awareness, this loving awareness. You are consciousness, awareness itself. Let experiences come and go like these words, appearing like waves or clouds, bubbles and vanishing in the open space of awareness. Vastness and stillness. This is your home. Relax into it. Trust.

You are the vast space of knowing, receiving sounds like clouds, receiving sensations and breath like waves of experience.

In this meditation, we started in the simple way of embodied awareness, grounding in the body, and then using an awareness of breath to bring some steadiness and calm to the attention, some ease in the midst of all that arises and passes. And then after time, we shifted our attention from the experiences of breath and sensation, from the waves of thoughts and feelings and sounds, to notice that we were aware of all these things—to become the awareness itself, to shift our identity, to become the loving witness as all the waves and clouds appeared and disappeared.

This is who you are. Consciousness was born into this body, will leave this body when you die at the end of life. And here and now, in the reality of the present, you can become this loving awareness. You can remember who you really are.

CHAPTER 110

Q and A: Seeing the World with the Heart of Wisdom

Jack Kornfield · 20 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Jack Kornfield holds space for profound questions about life's deepest mysteries. The dialogue opens with a participant from a death and dying group asking about the afterlife and what happens to accumulated wisdom when we die. Jack gently challenges the assumption that death destroys wisdom, drawing on near-death experiences and encouraging an open mind about what consciousness might encounter beyond the body. He recommends the traditional practice of reflecting on one's best intentions and good deeds as death approaches.*
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> *The conversation turns to the relationship between 'the one who knows' and the concept of non-self, referencing Joseph Goldstein's teachings and the Indian master Nisargadatta's famous saying: 'Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between these two my life flows.' Jack guides a participant through her life transition, helping her discover through direct inquiry that service, purpose, and love are the threads that matter most—demonstrating how the one who knows can illuminate our path.*
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> *The session concludes with an exploration of 'the sure heart's release' (nibbāna), referencing Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching on everyday nibbāna and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra's descriptions of liberation. Jack emphasizes that peace isn't found elsewhere but in any moment we let go of grasping. When the questioner discovers through reflection that simply being kind to oneself opens the gateway to freedom, Jack affirms this as the essence of the teaching—echoing Aldous Huxley's final wisdom that it all comes down to kindness.*

As you and the monks were chanting, "life is short," I found myself reflecting deeply on this truth. I'm in a death and dying group—we're all over age seventy, and some of us have life-threatening illnesses. We naturally start thinking not just about making peace with our friends and families, but about what comes afterwards, what the afterlife is like. My own preference is that I want my good works to continue with me, as well as my intentions to help other people who are left on earth. There's so much confusion about the afterlife, and yet it would be so helpful, so soothing, to think about it clearly. Can you tell me what's been helpful with all the people you've been sitting with as they die?

I will, but I want to ask you something first. I love the fact that you're in that group. What have you found already that helps you as you reflect on dying? What's made the difference?

Truthfully, I resent dying because it kills all the wisdom that I've been learning my whole life. That's why I hope I'd like to get another life to try and do it all over again with the wisdom that I have now, that I've built up in this life.

Let's just pause for a moment. You have the belief that when you die, it's going to kill all the wisdom. Feel that for a second. That's a painful thought to have. Do you know that's true?

No, I don't.

So stay with me for a minute. Say, "Okay, I don't actually know that I'm going to lose wisdom." In fact, sitting with people who died or came near death, left their body, and then came back—everyone thought their heart had stopped—they say, "Oh, wow, I learned so much more as I was dying." What if what you believe is not true at all? What if instead you actually learn when you die?

How would that be?

I would love that. I love learning new things, especially the kind of wisdom that we talk about here.

So you said a few beautiful things. First, I would keep that open mind, because it could well be true. You also said you want to come back and serve, you want to actually get better. That's the Bodhisattva vow—however many lifetimes it takes, I'm gonna come back. Let you and the Dalai Lama hold hands and do it another time. And when he's asked what happens when you die, he says, "I don't know. I'm really interested to find out myself." So you're in good company.

But there's something else. I heard your intention in that. And one of the practices we've learned, a traditional practice as you approach death, is to reflect on your best intentions and on the good deeds that you've done in your life, even little ones, because they brighten the heart and bring joy so that when this mysterious time comes, when consciousness leaves the body—which it will—you'll be surprised. It's not just going to be a flat piece of meat when the body dies. You float out, there's light, there's all these things that are awaiting you. Don't think that it will kill all the wisdom. In fact, you may learn more. How does that sound?

I love it. It sounds very hopeful. And like you say, I want to bring my wisdom forward and my intentions forward.

I think you will, but you'll have to wait and see. We're all in this mystery together.

Louisa, would you like to ask your question?

Yes. Hello.

Hi, Louisa. Nice to see you.

So as I was listening to you talk about the one who knows, I also listened to a recent lecture from Joseph Goldstein where he talked a lot about the known self and how the self is a concept like a river. I've been trying to make a parallel between the one who knows and the known self. I don't know if I'm onto something or if it's totally—

No, this is a beautiful and profound question. My teacher, this Indian master named Nisargadatta—you may have heard this phrase from him—he said, "Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between these two my life flows."

So the nature of consciousness—and this isn't something for you to believe, but really to experience—Joseph is talking about this because he's had the profound experience of no-self that comes in meditation. He looked for himself everywhere and he couldn't find something solid that would last. There's a personality in a body, but then it's gone. So, who are you really? Wisdom says, "I'm nothing." That's what Joseph's saying, but it's not the whole sentence. Love says, "I'm everything." And if you become loving awareness—in fact, that's what you are—then it's not your identity with the body or the personality, it's consciousness itself.

Now I'm going to pause for a second because this becomes quite philosophical, and these are deep and important questions. I want you to just get quiet for a moment and reflect: What makes you ask these questions? What's there in you?

I think it's this understanding that we're just... it's this paradox, right, that we are everything and nothing at the same time. And I don't know, maybe I've been thinking a lot about identity. I've been going through a lot of big transitions in life and work. I just finished the MMTCP and I'm teaching lessons and... yeah, I'm creating this whole new identity, but I still have my past as part of my presence.

Close your eyes—this is beautiful. You're in this big life transition. And in some way, as you reflect, you're trying to figure out how to understand it, how to hold it. Keep your eyes closed. So: I was these things, now I'm also becoming this, and I want to kind of figure out how to package it or hold it or understand it so that I can—

So you feel all that just getting quiet. And now hold all that with a compassionate heart and say yes. Here's Luisa in the middle of change, trying to look for some understanding to help navigate.

And then ask your heart: what's the most important thing to navigate change? This is the one who knows inside. Ask your heart. What's the thing, the thread, the thing that's most important to you to guide you in this?

"Service, purpose, love."

Service. So it's love and caring and service.

"Service."

How does that feel?

"It feels really good."

So you answered your question. "I feel very lit up when I think about these things."

So you answered that very deep question you asked just now, from the one who knows, and you could feel it—it lit you up. And you say, "Yeah, this is really the thread through all of it—job change and life change and so forth. Service, caring, love. This is who I am, this is what I really am."

And then forget about self and non-self. I mean, that's all philosophic in a way. The Zen Master Seungsahn, this wonderful great Korean Zen Master, used to look at us with those kind of questions, and he would say, "You already understand. You already understand." And you do. And what you said was beautiful. I could see you get lit up. So thank you.

"Thank you so much."

One more, maybe. Devon, would you like to ask your question?

"My question is, I've read that the sure heart's release is the meaning, the essence of the holy life. And I wonder, what does that mean? What is the sure heart's release?"

And what makes you ask the question?

"Well, based on teachings from you and others, I focused on recovering from trauma and things like that. So I focused a lot on mettā and self-care and things like that. But then sometimes I think, well, in the monasteries it would be all about focusing on the breath, and I should really do the real Buddhist approach, not a sort of Buddhism-light or something. So then I think, well, if the sure heart's release is the essence of it, then maybe I can tell if I'm on the right track or something."

This is beautiful, and it's a deep question. You're saying, "All right, I've done this work—trauma, recovering from trauma, doing lots of mettā." And then you have some thoughts about what happens in a monastery, whether it's the breath or other things.

In fact, monasteries are people. So basically—this is just a little aside, I hate to say this—but they're kind of like any other place. There are people who are wiser and there are ones who aren't. And you think, "Oh, I'm going to go to a peaceful place." And then they get in conflict with one another. So monasteries have all of that, as well as, of course, time to meditate.

Yes, the sure heart's release is a translation for liberation, or for nibbāna. I was reading these beautiful phrases from the Avatamsaka Sutra: non-distress, supreme harmony, the abode of peace, the release from shackles, non-conflict. These are different descriptions.

And again, I use that phrase from Ajahn Buddhadasa of everyday nibbāna. He said, "You think nibbāna is going to be found when you get a ticket and travel somewhere else and you'll find nibbāna there."

He said, but it's not there. It's there in any moment that you let go of grasping and your heart comes to peace. As Suzuki Roshi said, when you realize everything changes and find your composure in it.

So the sure heart's release points to the fact that in any moment, you can either be caught in your ideas, in your self-judgment, in your identification with trauma, in the pain you carry, the pain of the world that you feel—or in that same moment, you can become the loving awareness and say, "Oh yeah, I was caught in that, and I worry about that, and I have that pain, but that's not who I really am."

And here was the Buddha walking on foot for forty-five years, the dusty roads of India, in nirvana. Now, how could that be? It's obviously not some other place. He had to eat and bathe and talk to people. He also had people who got angry with him, and he had conflict in the community, and there were wars around—and still his heart was at peace.

So what you're speaking about and asking about, it's such a deep and beautiful question: Can I find this in my life? Do I have to go to a monastery? I want the real thing. You are the real thing. I hear the sincerity in your question, and you can. And then you ask, well, what is it that supports my heart being at peace? And the one who knows in you understands that. Oh yeah, this is what supports it.

Close your eyes for a moment since we're talking. Take a breath or two. And then a very simple reflection: What is it that supports that spaciousness and peacefulness of heart that you know from some moments in your life, that you know is possible? Let yourself reflect. What is it? And notice what comes as you do.

"When I just let myself be kind to myself. Forget about all the ideas and just be kind."

Forget about all those ideas and just be kind. It's so beautiful to have you say that. That's the one who knows. It's the very same thing Aldous Huxley said at the end of his life, just before he died. He said, all the things I've done, all the spiritual teachings—he said it just boils down to be kind, kind to yourself and others. And that is the release of the heart.

There is a release in that kindness. Kindness and love open the gateway to the garden, to say, I can be here in the world, not in conflict with it. Although conflict comes and you'll have all those pains, I can hold this with kindness. And I hear it from you, and it's beautiful. Thank you. You have it.

So I think that's enough words for the evening. I'm very glad that you all could join and be part of the meditation and the teachings, part of the fabric of community that's grown at Spirit Rock. And I feel a privilege, because when I teach, as I did tonight, I'm talking to myself as much as to you. It's like a little reminder: Jack, yes, remember, this is good stuff.

Thank you. Inviting the one who knows in all of you and in me.

So all of you, good hearts, all of you people, remember your dignity, remember the care for yourself, and to see the secret beauty in every being that you meet with respect. Live with kindness, as our last great master just taught us in that final question.

And I'll see you again. Thank you. Good night.

CHAPTER 111

The Sacred Pause

Jack Kornfield · 52 min

> *In this spring 2021 teaching, Jack Kornfield weaves together an early Buddhist sutta about the Buddha as a spiritual plowman with reflections on navigating the pandemic, racism, and climate crisis. Drawing from the Kasībhāradvāja Sutta (SN 7.11), where a Brahmin farmer challenges the Buddha's worthiness to receive alms, Kornfield illuminates how faith becomes our seed, mindfulness our plow blade, and compassion our guide pole in cultivating inner freedom.*
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> *The talk explores two complementary truths: that we are already perfect as expressions of loving awareness, yet there is always room for growth through tending the seeds of our hearts. Kornfield draws on Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that the quality of our life depends on which seeds we water—joy, peace, and compassion or fear, anger, and craving. He shares stories of transformation, from Alan Chadwick's miraculous garden grown in a junkyard to Maha Ghosananda leading Cambodian refugees through the killing fields with loving-kindness chants.*
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> *Practically, Kornfield emphasizes that obstacles in meditation—restlessness, doubt, difficult emotions—are not impediments but the very path itself. By learning to hold our inner difficulties with tender awareness, we develop the same capacities needed for relationships, parenting, work, and social change. The teaching culminates in an invitation to reflect on what seeds we most want to plant and water, both within ourselves and in the world, recognizing that we are the earth becoming conscious of itself.*

Let's have a bit of a Dharma conversation, some time to listen or reflect. The idea with these teachings or talks is not to try to remember everything—there's no quiz at the end, there's no grade—but to let yourself settle and listen in an inward way, to listen with the heart. Notice if there's anything that rings true to you, that serves as a reminder of what you already know in some deep way in yourself, and let that reminder be a kind of nourishment for you.

So here we are at the beginning of spring 2021, and all kinds of wild changes are happening in the world. The seventeen-year locusts are coming out in the Virginia, Maryland, and East Coast area by the billions. The coronavirus is still spreading widely across the world. While there's some great respite in having vaccines now become available to some, there's also the tragedy that many people are not receiving vaccines and that they're not being shared. Even the intellectual property is being held for profit

rather than for the good of humanity. And then we have, of course, the ongoing dilemmas of climate change and the very painful, sad, continued racism and violence—the anti-Asian violence that's happened. We can't say that we're shocked about the racism because it's been here all along. We've known it; it just makes itself more visible.

I've been standing out on the street, as I did for a long time with a sign saying "Black Lives Matter," and now it says "Safe and Protected Asian Lives, Respect and Care." I get a lot of thumbs up and horn honking from certain people and shouts and yells from others. For me it just feels important to stand up and say, "Yes, I'm with you, my brothers and sisters from Asia, or Asian Americans who've been here way longer than I have and my family." And also to express the gratitude I feel for the tradition and the incredible generosity of the teachers and teachings and cultures from India and Thailand and Burma and so forth.

So here we all are sharing this—the midst of the pandemic and the beginning of opening up, in the US anyway and other parts of the world, of our connections with one another. Not post-pandemic, but beginning to emerge. How do we come out of it? How do we hold this? How do we do this in a wise way? And what are the lessons to be learned? There are so many.

There's a lesson I find in how a certain solitude and stillness has come along with the restrictions and being sequestered. I realized this nourishes me. I don't want to get so speedy again and travel quite as much. I somehow want to listen more deeply. All of us have heard this, but it's not been an easy thing either. How do we tend ourselves? How do we tend this world?

Here is a very early sutta, a text from the first years of the Buddha's wandering in India. Early one morning, when the Blessed One was out on his alms round, the Buddha approached an area being plowed in springtime, where a wealthy Brahmin landowner was distributing food to his workers. When the Brahmin saw the Buddha coming for alms, he said, "I, oh monk, plow and sow, and having plowed and sown and worked the fields, then do I eat. You too should likewise plow and sow, and having done so, you should eat." He was putting him down, saying, "Hey, I work—why should I give you food?"

The Buddha responded, "I too, oh Brahman, plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat."

The Brahman said, "You claim to be a plowman, yet I see no plow. Tell me, what kind of plowing is it that you do?"

The Buddha replied, "Faith is my seed and composure the rain. Clarity is my plow and yoke. Compassion is my guide pole, and my heart and mind is the harness. Mindfulness is the plow blade. I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen, drawing the plow steadily toward freedom without regret. This is how I plow, and it bears the fruit of deathlessness. Whoever plows in this way will become free of all sorrow and distress."

Then the Brahmin exclaimed, "Let the venerable monk eat! You are indeed a plowman, and your plowing bears the fruit of freedom." He poured milk rice into the bowl. But as he did, the bowl hissed as if it were red hot, and all that was liquid flew out of the bowl. The Buddha stood there peacefully and then walked on his way.

This is the spring plowing of planting the seeds of faith and tending them with wise effort and compassion, using truth to cultivate release, with compassion as the guide pole. But there's an interesting, almost archetypal or mythological moment in this story. Why is it that when the Brahmin landowner finally put something in the Buddha's bowl, the Buddha stepped back? As the story is told, it's as if to say, "I don't do an exchange for this food." But when the food goes into the bowl, it hisses. Why would that be?

Those of you who are listening who are also farmers will know immediately that when you cut a furrow in a field with a plow blade, at the end of that furrow, if you touch the blade of that plow, it gets red hot. This was the symbol that the bowl the Buddha was carrying was red hot from the plowing that he did—the transformation of all the difficulties of the heart into freedom.

This text, this story, has a couple of different levels to it. The first is the Buddha expressing, in some way, "I have practiced until I've come to the deathless, to that which is beyond birth and death, to a freedom of heart amidst all circumstances."

T.S. Eliot, the poet, called this a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. Sometimes it's called the abode of peace, or the supreme harmony. It is that place of being without wanting or resisting a single thing—an openness of heart, absolutely present and awake.

"Oh nobly born," the Buddha reminds us at the beginning of so many texts. Remember, this freedom is possible for you too. Remember that you too can awaken this freedom of heart.

Now, how to do this?

I remember having a conversation with Ram Dass when I was relatively new at teaching. He'd become a friend and a mentor, and in fact came to the second retreat I ever taught, in a camp in Western Massachusetts. Joseph Goldstein and I were teaching together, and that retreat was attended by Jon Kabat-Zinn and Dan Goleman and my beloved Trudy Goodman and a whole group of other people who became themselves well-known dharma teachers.

Sometime after that, I was sitting with Ram Dass—maybe it was after the first year of teaching, or the second—together at Naropa Institute, the Buddhist university. And I said, "I'm kind of getting the hang of teaching in ways that really serve the different people who come. I'll be in a room and there will be those who are quite new to meditation with their questions, and some who have practiced a long time and maybe spent time in an ashram or temple or monastery for months or years, and some in the middle, some with backgrounds in therapy or psychology. And I try to find something I can say to each one of them, where they are, that uplifts their heart, that gives them a sense of nourishment."

And Ram Dass paused. He leaned back the way he did sometimes and smiled. He said, "Yes. And when you get good"—with a little smile—"you can say something so simple and elegant and true that it resonates on all those levels at once."

I think of that often. I think of Suzuki Roshi's phrase "Zen mind, beginner's mind," and picking up that book and reading that the goal of meditation is to always keep our beginner's mind—how simple and elegant and direct that truth is. To be here now, where we are, with a beginner's mind.

I think of my teacher Ajahn Chah, who was simple in that way. You came to him struggling or suffering, and he'd peer at you and say, "Suffering? Having a hard time?" Then he'd smile kindly, with great compassion, and say, "Aw, must be a bit attached, huh?" That was all. So simple.

A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. A letting go. A presence.

And it's not far away, oh nobly born. We live in the realm of mystery, and we forget it because we go through our quotidian tasks of the day. We get busy, we get lost in thought and all the things that come with being a human being. But then we enter a magnificent cathedral, or hear an extraordinary piece of music, or stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or high in the mountains. Or even more—when we're there for the birth of a child, or in that mysterious and tender moment when we might hold the hand

of someone at the very end of their life, sensing their body and spirit separate as consciousness leaves and it's just the empty shell of a body, and the gates between the worlds open. We know this in making love. We know the mystery in so many ways.

I think of my daughter when she was little, how astonished she was by a ladybug that came into her room, or by a little red pebble. One day we were walking—maybe she was three years old—in the early evening, and she said, "Daddy, look! The moon is following us. When we turn the corner, the moon comes with us. How does it know to do that?"

The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity.

Can we, in this equinox, in this beginning of spring, in the midst of the great difficulties of our lives in this world, in the midst of the unbearable beauty of life—can we pause and be present? Can we take a step back and be the witness, the loving awareness, and remember that who we are is consciousness itself, having a human experience?

When we do, our eyes and face get soft. I love watching people come to the end of retreat. They come in all tense, carrying the struggles of their lives. And after a week or ten days or however long it is, you see them and it's as if they've been born anew. Their brows are unfurrowed. We talk about it as the Vipassana facelift.

But you don't have to go on retreat. The invitation to pause, even in short ways—to walk among the trees, to take time as spring begins and as the pandemic begins to open a little bit with very thoughtful care—is always here. Pause and remember the sense of mystery. Find that peace that's not arguing with the world or trying to make it something, but actually, as the Buddha that you are, is simply present, compassionate, and open.

Mary Oliver writes:

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me, the trees stir in their leaves and call out, "Stay awhile." The light flows from their branches and they call again. "It's simple," they say. "And you too have come into the world to do this—to go easy, to be filled with light, to shine."

Taking the pause, the sacred pause, there's a fundamental dignity that you carry, that every human being carries. And here is the Buddha standing in the middle of the spring plowing, in some way being judged as unworthy, for he's not a farmer or a working person. Yet he stands there in the place of peace and radiance and being, and says, "I have done my plowing, and it bears the fruit of the freedom of heart—to be just as I am in this mystery."

So that's one part of this text: the invitation to be present in mystery, seeking nothing, becoming the conscious witness of it all, the loving awareness.

But there's another part of this text. Zen Master Suzuki Roshi explains it beautifully when he said, "You are perfect just as you are, and there's still room for improvement." And that's the plowing part.

Even as we remember the mystery and rest in being and presence, we can listen to the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: "The mind and the heart is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds—seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love; seeds of craving, fear, anger, hate, and forgetfulness. These healthy and unhealthy seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of the heart and mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water. If you water a seed of peace in your heart, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you'll become happy. If the seed of anger in you is watered, you will become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong."

So this is also part of this beautiful text. Yes, there's the presence of freedom that the Buddha displays. And yes, he says, "I have done my plowing." Each time you sit in meditation, you follow in those footsteps. Trust and faith is your seed. Attention is your effort to be present for what is. Compassion is your guide. And you too do the plowing that brings freedom.

Now over the last thirty years, as we know, there have been eight or nine thousand papers and studies that show the benefit of training in mindfulness and mindful loving awareness and compassion. It increases empathy and connection. It helps with emotional regulation. It steadies and deepens our capacity for attention. It actually changes our nervous system—measurable MRIs in the brain. It changes the epigenetics in our cells. Even eight weeks of meditation is shown to change the telomeres, those caps at the end of chromosomes that are protective and keep us healthy and help us age well.

So neuroscience is affirming what the Buddha said: our practice of wise attention—*yoniso manasikara*, it's called, caring or loving attention—planting the seeds of trust, mindfulness, and compassion, they change you. They change me. They change us.

Now what's important also to understand is that this transformation happens not just when things are easy, but even when the gardening gets difficult.

There was a famous gardener who taught at the University of California in Santa Cruz, the father of biodynamic gardening called Alan Chadwick. He gardened by growing soil to grow plants. And what he meant by soil was different than the earth's surface that you usually think of. He meant a power in the universe that could be concentrated in gardening to capture cosmic magic. Chadwick grew soil and planted seeds based on relationships that exist between the Earth and its moon, the sun, the other planets, the weather, the way doves in the area coo, the mist in the trees, and everything you could imagine.

When winter was very bleak, he'd sing about the energies under the surface of the earth: "Underneath, the seeds are full of life, life! This very moment, the seeds are waking up and pushing up to the sun. The doves are singing in spring—coo, coo—life, life!"

Once Chadwick took a class to a junkyard lot that was full of rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, lots of abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. The owner said, "Sure, but you're crazy—that soil is dead." This garden later became famous for its extraordinarily delicious vegetables and its gorgeous flowers.

This is our task in this world: to plant beautiful seeds, to till the soil with our hearts, and to tend them.

And I think of my teacher, colleague, friend, and inspiration, Maha Ghosananda, the Gandhi of Cambodia, guiding the hundreds of thousands of refugees who escaped the Khmer Rouge back to their villages where temples were burned and most of their families were killed.

And him saying, you can't go back in a bus or the back of a truck. We have to walk together and reclaim this land with loving kindness.

And so he would lead long lines of hundreds and hundreds of villagers with a bell in the front, chanting, "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law." And as he chanted the chant of loving kindness through

the killing fields and the places of destruction, until people could go back to their villages, he said, "With every step, you reclaim your heart and you reclaim this land." This was planting the seeds of loving kindness in a place that so needed it.

Now, every gardener expects obstacles to arise. Weeds, drought, insects, blights—all of those kinds of things will come. And guess what happens when you meditate and you do your spiritual journey or practice, or gardening, we shall call it? Go ahead, ring your bells, light your candles, burn your incense, call out to the gods. But watch out, because the gods will come and they will put you on the anvil and fire up the forge and beat you and beat you until they turn brass into pure gold.

So you sit down to meditate and you say, I want to be peaceful, calm, gracious. And what happens? It's hard to make a time. Your life is too busy. You've got a long list of things to do, people and things that you care about to attend to. And then finally you get to sit down and you're sleepy or you're restless. Or you have the "if only" mind—if only I did this, if only I hadn't done that, if only... All the desires. Or your doubt comes: I'm not getting very far. Should I be doing this? Or you feel all the tensions your body holds.

And what do you do? The line from Mary Oliver: "to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves," to hold it in tenderness.

And then you sit and tears come. Ajahn Chah said, if you haven't wept deeply, you probably haven't meditated very long. Because we carry the tears of the world, the ocean of tears of life, along with its magnificent beauty.

And fear comes, and you bow, and you name it. Fear, fear—as we did in our sitting. Let me not turn from you. Let me feel this wave of fear. Fear, open, show me your dance. Breath stops. Everything contracts. Fear, fear, I feel like I'm going to die. Dying, dying. Now what? Oh, I'm still anxious. Anxious, anxious. I wish you would go away. Wishing, wishing. I hate this fear. Hating, hating, hating. Oh, but I'm tired of it all. Tired. Maybe I'll just go back to my breath. Calm, ease, breathing in and out. Hey, I did pretty good with that fear. Oh, pride. Pride.

All right. Another breath.

And you start to smile. You become the loving witness of all your dramas. You name them. The emotions have come—the shame, the guilt, the fear. Instead of resisting, you become the loving awareness that says yes, this too is part of being human.

How do you touch the difficulties that arise in your heart and mind, the pains in your body, the difficult emotions? Can you find the courage as a gardener to turn toward that which is difficult—the weeds, the insects, the blight? And can you tend them with a tender heart and care, and water the seeds of compassion for it all?

Here's the secret, or one of the secrets that's important for you to know: these obstacles are the path. It's not like they're in the way of your getting to some magnificent, great, wonderful state where you're always open and stop breathing because it's just so peaceful.

These obstacles are the path, for the very things that are difficult—your restlessness, the doubting mind, the tears that you carry for yourself or the world—these are the places where you learn to steady your heart, where you learn to recognize and allow what's true, where you learn forgiveness and kindness. They're the places where you shift your identity from being caught in how it's supposed to be and how you're supposed to be, to that place of love. They're the places to grow strong and steady and free in the heart.

The Buddha says, as the farmer channels water to their land, so the wise one directs kindness and compassion to their own heart and mind.

You remember that phrase in Zen: there are only two things—you sit and you sweep the garden, and it doesn't matter how big the garden is. That is, you quiet the mind and tend the heart, and then you get up and tend the garden. A mindful presence as you quiet yourself in this turning of the seasons, and then a mindful loving response.

As you learn these inner capacities in meditation—to be with all the waves of emotion and doubt and thought, all the beautiful things and the joy that open and then the closing again, the contraction and opening and closing, just as the body breathes, the emotions and the heart open and close, and the mind opens fast and then closes in its ideas—as you learn to be with all those waves, that inner gardening gives you the same capacities you will need in tending the world.

In your love relationship, should you have one—and you do in some way, whether it's a loving partner or family member or community—but especially when you fall in love with somebody, it seems so wonderful. They just seem so compatible and magic and special, and you just love it and think that everything's going to be great. You know how it works. And then you decide to live together and have a big family and start a business together and buy property and make a whole tribe, or whatever you do.

But you find someone you fall in love with. And then at some point, this little thing starts to happen we could call disappointment. They fall off the pedestal. You see their messy humanity, like your own. You get irritable, or they are irritable. One of you gets anxious, the other gets judgmental. And there's the place to love. Because you've learned it in your meditation, you've learned it for love.

When I used to perform weddings—which I really don't do anymore, but I did for a long time, and most of them are still married—one of the things I would do is have the two partners who are going to be married, at some point in the ceremony, look at one another. And I'd say, "Do you take this person as is?" You know how in the used car lot there'll be a sign in the window of the car: "Here it is, $6,900 for this car, as is." I'd look at these people who love one another and are getting married, and I'd say, "Do you take this person as is?" Because that's the game. That's really what love is.

There's one way to be in relationship, which is attachment—you want something from them, and it's a sort of business deal where they give you and you give them. There's another way in which you, as the Buddha, as the wise one, as the compassionate goddess Kuan Yin, see the beautiful spirit behind the eyes of this person. And your love is simply like the gardener's, to say, "I'm here for you, and I want to support you to blossom and grow in whatever way you can." That is the game you learn in your inner life, translated into relationship.

But it's true in every relationship and in everything. I certainly see it in my marriage to Trudy, my beloved, after the last year plus of being sequestered together. There were moments of cabin fever, if you will, or irritation. And then I just look at her, and I step back from the place of loving awareness, and I see her as a little girl, one or two years old, toddling around. I see her as seven or eight. I see her as a young teenager, thirteen, fourteen years old, with that kind of brightness and innocence. I see her as a young woman. I see her when she had her child and as she grew. And I see her now, and I see this whole arc of being and the mystery behind it, the joys and the suffering she's been through. When I step back and get quiet and gaze in that way, instead of with judgment or need, I just feel a gratitude and an ability to love and be present for the mystery of this other person. And it's the same gardening.

And parenting—you have these kids and they're small and they try to put everything in their mouth. They're a little older and they hit each other with blocks, and you have to socialize them. Then they start careening down the street on their bicycle and they fall off, and you have to take care of them when they hurt themselves. Then they hit pu-

berty. And what do you do with that teenage angst? Then there's sexuality and alcohol and drugs, and they're not who you think they should be. You get through all of that, and then they leave you.

How do you do it? You do it as a gardener. These are beautiful seeds. You water the goodness in them, as you do in yourself. You tend them, you love them, and you stay steady.

The same thing in business. You'll have obstacles—not enough capital.

The market changes, the competition gets stronger, employees quit—whatever challenges arise. You water the good seeds.

And we need this practice now more than anything for social change. The divisiveness, the war, the racism. I've been reading a wonderful book called *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, where she reframes the racial suffering we have in a deeper way through the lens of caste—like caste in India or caste in Nazi Germany, where one group is empowered over another, abuses another. It's really worth looking at. I recommend it highly because it offers a way of understanding injustice, how we participate in it, and how we can change it.

But it's a tough time. I watch what's happening to my friends in Burma. We led a march across the Golden Gate Bridge a week or two ago with hundreds of people from Burma and from the Buddhist community to say, "We're with you"—and spread those images across the media and underground in Burma so people know they're not alone.

We know this: If we want the world to be different, we have to water the right seeds. We have to see what really matters. We have to tend those seeds that matter most.

Here is Robert Kennedy, from a speech he gave the year before he was assassinated. He was asked about his vision for the economy, and someone raised the question of Gross National Product. Kennedy shook his head and said: Gross National Product does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials. It allows neither for the justice in our courts nor for the justness of our dealings with each other. The Gross National Product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

This is it, baby. This is our garden. Maybe the myth is that we stepped out of the Garden of Eden, but we have the garden of this beautiful planet and this beautiful life. How are you tending it? What seeds do you plant? What do you water?

Henry David Thoreau said, "I do not believe that a plant will grow where there are no seeds, but convince me that you have planted a seed and I'm prepared to expect miracles."

And so our meditation, our spiritual life—it's not about becoming a good meditator. It's about one breath at a time, one plant at a time, one day, one moment. And seeing the goodness in the seeds. As Nelson Mandela said, it never hurts to see the goodness in another person, to acknowledge the goodness in another person. They often act the better because of it.

I see my friend Father Greg Boyle—I've read from his book *Tattoos on the Heart*—where he started Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, working with gang kids who would otherwise be thrown away by the system into prison, or shot, or worse. And he sees the secret beauty behind these posturing, tattooed gang kids, who are mostly aggressive because they're trying to save their own lives. He meets them exactly where they are. And he loves them.

This is what you get to do. To shift somehow from the struggle of things and say, "I can water beautiful seeds. I can take a walk and stand still among the trees," as Mary Oliver says. I can do compassion practice. I can stand up for justice. And do it not because you have to, but because you *get* to.

Change your language from "I have to" to "I get to." I get to tend this garden, even with all the rusted cars and cement, as Alan Chadwick found. Underneath, we can tend this soil and make something really beautiful grow.

There's a story of a woman named Cathrine Sneed. Cathrine Sneed started the Garden Project in San Francisco some years ago. She was concerned about the soul death of so many people in the San Francisco prison system. So she began a project to allow any of those who were incarcerated to help plant a garden. They were invited to grow vegetables in a garden plot behind one of the prison buildings. Through some fundraising, she got them seedlings and mulch, fertilizer, garden tools. To be able to grow a garden with their own hands, to be responsible for its blossoming, to overcome insects and drought—this brought out the best in men who had otherwise been thrown away by the world. And we have so many millions in our racist poverty prison system.

Instead, it changed them. She talks about one macho giant saying, "Don't step on my babies," as she walked through the garden. The prison wardens were amazed by the change. The garden became so important to those who cared for these patches that

their lives began to revolve around them. In fact, when the time came for these men to be released from prison, some purposely violated their parole so they could return to their gardens.

This led Cathrine to the inevitable next step: a garden project for ex-prisoners that spread across the Bay Area. Because the harvest she was interested in was not the fruits and vegetables—it was the harvest of the souls and spirits of these men.

I don't think this is impossible in this world. I've talked to you about the better angels of our nature—

the book by Steven Pinker, where he details with numbers the decrease in slavery in the world, even though it's still here in painful ways. The decrease in child abuse and child labor exploitation, even though it's still here. The decrease in warfare over the centuries, even though it's still present. The increase in the freedom that women experience, even though it's still terrible in many ways around the world.

When you look at centuries of human life on this earth through the lens of consciousness and care and improvement, you start to see that it's possible for us to change this world. Even though things seem difficult, we can do this.

Now, the idea isn't to make it perfect—to create some ideal house and garden where you get the camera at the right angle and the right time of day and post it online, some showy garden representing an ideal you have. It's a little bit like that New Yorker cartoon showing a couple of fish swimming in the depths of the ocean, one fish talking to the other, saying, "I want the whole thing—the glass bowl, the blue pebbles, the little white castle." You know how we are. We always want something else.

But the point isn't to make a perfect garden. The point is to perfect your love. To take the garden that you've been given and find within yourself the intention to turn it into beauty, to do it with joy.

L.R. Knost writes, "Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break and all things can be mended—not with time, as they say, but with intention. So love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the healing and the light and the water that you can offer to it."

Take a moment and reflect as we start the spring amidst the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows of life. What seeds do you most want to plant? What seeds do you most want to water and nourish? What are the seeds in yourself that are calling out to be watered and nourished—your body and your heart? And what are the seeds in the world that you can care for?

You can do this, oh nobly born. You are the plowman in that sutra. The plowwoman. You are the one who tends this garden of the world.

As Mark Morford wrote long ago, stop thinking all these global crises are all there is. Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation, for every trouble of humanity, there are a thousand counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty happening all over the world right now, on a breathtaking scale, from flower box to cathedral.

Resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head or sigh and throw in the towel. Remember, this is the perfect moment to change the energy—to renew and envision the re-enchantment of the world, to step right up and crank up your personal volume right when it might seem dark or bitter or offensive or acrimonious and conflicted. This is your opening.

Remember mystery. Believe in the seeds that you plant and water as part of a groundswell, a seemingly small but actually very large impending karmic shift, a foundational shift, the beginning of something important and beautiful that can grow with your care.

Pablo Neruda writes, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring."

It's never too late to start again, wherever you are. This day, you can forgive. You can let go. You can honor the secret beauty and mystery in every being. You can become that loving awareness that is your true nature. For we are the earth becoming conscious. We are consciousness itself—the earth becoming conscious of itself. Such a mystery, and we get to do something really beautiful with it.

This is why you meditate. And this is why we get to come together and hold hands with each other, or as we do even this evening, gather to share our care, our respect, our love.

I know as I finish that I speak of my own intention. I want to become like Ram Dass became at the end of his life. He grew more and more transparent and more and more loving. He loved everything. He said, "Whatever it is, I love it." And he really showed it. "I love this too, and this, and this." On his altar, all the saints gathered together—statues of Mother Mary and Jesus and Buddha and Kuan Yin, passages on the mercy of Allah, Indian saints and saints from all around the world. And there, of course, were Dick Cheney and Donald Trump, and they all had their place. He said, "My love is for all. I love it all." And he would gaze with those eyes like the Buddha standing there, not wanting a single thing, but becoming that loving awareness.

This is who we really are.

Plant beautiful seeds. Love it all.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 112

Meditation: The Sacred Pause

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a practice of mindful, loving awareness. He begins by establishing a dignified yet relaxed posture—seated "like the queen or the king on your throne"—and invites participants to take their seat "as the Buddha that you are under your own tree of enlightenment." This framing reflects the tradition's recognition that awakening is available to all beings in this very life.*
>
> *The meditation unfolds in stages, beginning with breath awareness as an anchor. Kornfield encourages practitioners to notice the breath wherever it naturally appears—nostrils, throat, or belly—while cultivating qualities of calm and ease. He then introduces a technique for working with strong experiences: when powerful sensations, emotions, or thoughts arise, practitioners are invited to release attention from the breath, turn toward the experience with a bow of welcome, and name it gently ("sad, sad" or "planning, planning") until the wave passes.*
>
> *The practice culminates in resting as awareness itself—what Kornfield calls "loving awareness." Here the instruction shifts from attending to objects of experience to recognizing oneself as the vast, open field of consciousness in which all phenomena arise and pass. This approach integrates samatha (calm abiding) with elements of insight practice, offering practitioners a direct taste of their "own true nature" and "home." The session demonstrates how formal meditation serves as a sacred pause from daily activity, creating space for both settling the mind and recognizing the spacious awareness that is always present.*

Good evening, my friends. It's a pleasure to welcome you here to this Monday night sitting group, class, and community.

Let's begin with a period of meditation of mindful, loving awareness.

Find a way that you can sit that's comfortable, stable, and at ease. Feet flat on the floor if you're in a chair, sitting upright with some sense of alertness, but also gracious—not rigid, but rather like the queen or the king seated on your throne. If you're on a floor or cushion in some other form, make sure that you're steady, stable, and connected to the earth.

Once you take a steady posture, halfway between heaven and earth in this human form, allow your eyes to close gently. You take your seat as the Buddha that you are, under your own tree of enlightenment.

First, take a couple of deeper breaths, just to let go and release whatever is obvious that you're carrying. Notice if there's any obvious tension or tightness in your body, and if you can easily release it, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders drop and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body resting through your buttocks and your feet, connected with the earth as if you had roots into the earth—steady, stable. Let your belly be soft and your breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, rest just here where you are. Just as spring begins, start to feel how your body is breathing itself, taking in the air that covers this earth, the shared breath, how it renews itself with each breath.

In the most simple way, bring your loving awareness to feel the breath wherever it's natural—in the coolness and tingling in the back of the throat, or coolness in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to sense the breath, put your hand on your belly and let it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you feel each breath, if you like, you can whisper in the back of your mind "calm" or "ease," or simply invite that quality of peaceful steadiness with this breath. One breath after another, rest the attention on the breath. Let all the other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath—feelings, thoughts, sounds. Calm and ease with each breath.

For now, when you notice the attention wanders during this first part of the meditation, notice and come back gently to the next breath, three or four breaths. Simply return to ease and calm with a few more breaths.

Receive each breath with a loving awareness. This breath inviting ease, calm. Let the breath breathe itself, short or long, deep or shallow. It has its own rhythms, and you are the loving witness, feeling the waves of the breath.

Let the body relax. Let the mind settle. Let the heart be soft. Feel the breath in the midst of it all.

As you sit quietly, feeling the breath breathe itself, letting the thoughts and feelings and sounds rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath, periodically there will be strong experiences that pull your attention away. A strong body sensation—tension, pain, itching, tingling, coolness, heat—or an emotion like sadness or longing, or excitement or joy, or thoughts like planning and remembering.

When a strong wave pulls you from the breath—not a background wave, but a strong one—let go of your attention to the breath and receive that new experience as if with a bow. Welcome it with the same loving awareness that you've given to the breath. Name it gently. If it's sadness, you can note "sad, sad," or "excitement, excitement," or "planning," or "tingling," or "tension."

As you name the waves, let them wash through body and mind, even if they're strong. Sad, sad. Excited, excited. Restless. Peaceful. Planning. Then, when the wave has passed or you're at ease with it, return back to the breath for a time, settling steady with the breath.

Now you alternate attention between the breath and receiving the strong experiences, naming them gently and feeling the whole wave as you do, until they pass. You are the loving witness of the breath and of the waves of life experience.

This breath, this experience, received with mindful loving awareness, just as it is.

Let the breath come and go as it will. Notice the strong waves of experience. You become the field of loving awareness—steady and open.

If it's helpful, you can sense the loving awareness as a space like the sky, vast and open. You are consciousness itself. You are the loving awareness.

And within this loving awareness arises breath and sounds, sensations, feelings, thoughts—arising and passing like waves in the vast open space of loving awareness. You are the consciousness, the witness to it all. Open. Vast. Silent.

Rest in awareness. Rest in loving awareness. It is your own true nature. It is your home.

CHAPTER 113

Q and A: The Sacred Pause

Jack Kornfield · 20 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Jack Kornfield engages with long-time practitioners on the essential question of how to move from simple awareness to loving awareness. Through a guided experiential exercise with one student, he demonstrates that loving awareness isn't a distant goal but an accessible quality of holding our experience with tenderness—like being embraced by a dear friend.*
>
> *The discussion touches on a common pitfall in meditation: the desire for deeper concentration and special experiences. Kornfield validates that meditative states of bliss and stillness have their place, but reminds us they are not the ultimate goal since everything changes. True freedom lies in becoming what he calls 'the loving witness'—being at peace with things as they are, embracing both pleasant and difficult experiences with acceptance.*
>
> *For those teaching the dharma, Kornfield addresses the tension between using research-backed benefits to attract newcomers while staying true to meditation's deeper purpose. He suggests both dimensions are valid: people may begin practice to relieve stress or find steadiness amid upheaval, and these are legitimate starting points that can naturally open into discovering how to love and be at peace wherever one finds oneself. The session concludes with a touching reflection on the practice of recognizing and naming the beauty in others—a form of generosity that creates connection and reminds people of their inherent worthiness.*

So we have a bit of time for questions or your own description of your practice. How are you gardening? What are you working with in gardening yourself, tending your own heart or tending the community in the world around you?

Ernest, if you want to unmute and ask your question.

"Hello, Jack."

Hi, Ernie. Glad to see you. We've known each other for thirty years or more.

"Right, for forty. We're pretty close."

Forty. Yeah. We were young, remember?

"Oh, yeah. We were young and foolish, and now you know how it is."

I know. As Ryokan said, "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change."

"So my question is, I would like some encouragement and ways of moving from awareness to this loving awareness. I mean, I know the phrase, and I've been doing the practice for a long time. So the awareness, more or less. But what are some ways of moving toward this quality of loving awareness? It's a word. I can sort of get it, but I don't think I can really rock it."

We've talked about this, but I'm trying to remember. Do you ever do metta practice? Does it work for you or does it feel artificial?

"It's pretty much artificial, pretty much rote, mechanical kind of thing."

Okay, so close your eyes for a moment and sit here and tune into your body just as you sit. Notice both the sensations, the quality of ease as you sit, and also the places of tension or pain that you have, as in everybody. And keeping your eyes closed, notice it all. Are there areas that are tense or tight or painful, as well as places of relaxation?

"Not particularly."

So your body's pretty much at ease?

"Pretty much, yeah. A little pressure at the bottom of my spine from the way I'm sitting, but that's it."

All right, so first of all, some gratitude to have the body at ease. And as we know with human bodies, they're not always at ease. Now imagine that the most loving person you can think of comes over and puts their arm around your shoulder and says, "I am with you," and just kind of sidles up and holds you in some really kind way as a brother or sister or loving being. Imagine how that feels.

"There's a kind of softness and relaxation across my shoulders. I'm imagining Hamid, by the way."

Lovely. So imagine here's Hamid putting his arm around you with this very big heart that he has, saying, "Ernie," you know, he's really loving. You can feel he loves you. Your shoulders relax, your body. Now feel this. What you're experiencing is loving awareness. You've got it. How does it feel?

"There's a kind of softness, a little bit of tears coming up. Relaxation pretty much along here, kind of an 'oh' sort of quality."

Yeah. And you could do the same for—

emotions or things that come up—you can hold them in that same way, or imagine Hameed with you. And then you can extend it in ways to others. So it's a beautiful question, and it was fun to go on the ride with you and enjoy it. Thank you.

Just as an aside, I don't know if you remember back in the early 90s, you were teaching groups of senior students at Spirit Rock. There were two groups of about twenty-five each. I don't know if you recall.

Yes, I do remember that we did that.

Oh, half a dozen of us are still meeting twice a month.

Fantastic. That's beautiful. I'm inspired. And the beautiful thing is that we start to teach one another—we actually help each other. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, the next Buddha is going to be the Sangha. It's actually going to be us all holding hands and connecting hearts. So thank you.

Lovely. Thank you.

Let's take another question.

Hello, Jack. I was really called upon to ask a question before the talk, and I don't really have a specific question. I guess I just wanted to share that I've found lately with my meditation practice a desire and longing and craving for experience—for deeper concentration, for peacefulness. And the thing that I found is that what really matters right now is just to love and to be at ease and to be accepting and to just allow. To allow the good, the bad. It's a whole other way, a whole other feeling. It's just a lot more beautiful.

Thank you for sharing this. You described something so important and wise. There are meditative states and experiences, and they can be beautiful. You can have bliss, or dissolve into light, or your mind becomes so still. These are beautiful things worth experiencing and having. But they're not really the goal, because they don't last. Everything changes. And if you get caught—"I want concentration, I want bliss"—then you struggle.

They're useful to know. They open you, and you realize, "Oh, this heart and mind can be peaceful." But then what you said on top of that, with so much wisdom, is that there is a different way, a different dimension—what I'll call the loving witness, the loving awareness—of loving things as they are. That gives you a freedom wherever you are. So mostly I'm just repeating back what you said as a kind of gratitude and acknowledgment, because it's beautiful. And it's beautiful for everybody to listen to and hear.

Thank you. Thanks for your teachings.

It's a pleasure. Thank you.

So as I build up my own little sangha and start teaching—I'm going to start my fourth cohort on Zoom, and I took your and Tara's teacher training, which was absolutely amazing—the one thing that's interesting is that because of all the research that has come out, there is this trap of getting into meditation as part of a great self-improvement project. It's interesting because at the same time, I want to make it appealing for people. I want to bring in as many people as I can reach. But I want to make it clear that that's not really necessarily the goal, that there is no such thing as a goal. As you said, it's not about becoming a good meditator. So I just wanted to see if you have anything to say about the mishaps of all this research. It's a good way to bring people in, but I don't want to be misleading them.

The beautiful thing is that they're both true. They're not actually opposite. Again, it's like that plowing sutra where the Buddha is already content and absolutely joyful and at peace and free, and he says, "I did my plowing to get here." But where it led him was to this freedom. So in some way, these are different dimensions of practice.

Very often in the beginning, people will come because they're suffering or because they need to release their stress, or they need to find a way to steady themselves in the midst of upheaval, or work with their fear. Those are beautiful and legitimate ways to practice. There's a certain way in which the Four Noble Truths say there is suffering, and it has its causes, and there's an end to that. But that's not the end of the story. The story goes on to say you can have more peace.

So it's a beautiful thing to say. You don't have to say this is the only thing, this is the beginning, or this is where you start. But in fact, the goal of practice really is to learn how to love, or to learn how to be at peace wherever you are, even with all the ups and downs. And we'll get to that too. In some way, you get to offer them—you open the banquet, and it gets even bigger, because all of that is part of it. Those are valuable things for people, worth honoring. And what makes you a good teacher is that you know that beyond any particular change or improvement idea they have, it's actually possible to invite them to a kind of freedom and well-being.

Are you enjoying the teaching?

I'm loving teaching. I think the thing I get snagged on is when I'm trying to get a group together—where can I find the people? Or maybe I feel rejected because I reach out to people and they don't want to do it. I don't want to put that on them. Sometimes people are not ready. Sometimes it's really not what they want to be doing with their time.

Yes. And sometimes it will be a very small group. When Suzuki Roshi first came to San Francisco, he sat with two people. And then this whole beautiful community grew. He talked about it. He said, "If I sit myself, if two people come, that's fine. If ten people come, it's fine."

We have ways in which we judge ourselves. I think about Ram Dass again. Many years ago he said, "I used to go in and there'd be a Ram Dass lecture, and the first thing I would do would be to count the house to see how many people came to see Ram Dass." Am I worthy or something? So that's part of being human. And what you do is just smile and say, "Yeah, but actually you don't know." That one person—if you have a group and there's one or two people—you could change their life. And they could change the world.

You have no idea. So I think what you're doing is really beautiful, and it will grow. It's like gardening—you just keep watering the good seeds and things will grow.

"Hi Jack, thank you for all the wonderful teachings. I've been following you for thirty-five years."

This is what I've been doing. One of the things about getting older is you get less afraid to do what you think you should do. In my heart, my feeling is that everybody is worthy, but most people really don't see their own beauty. And so what my practice has been about, in large part, is trying to have the courage to express to them what I see.

I have worked with people both professionally and as a volunteer, and in everyday life—people who are really quite extraordinary in their way, who have no idea. And in telling them, it's been interesting to see the response. Sometimes there are tears: "Nobody's ever said that." Sometimes it's just seeing that they feel seen and known, and that they don't have to be perfect to be that good.

What brings me some grief is when I see the violence that takes place. I really believe that some of those people who commit it have no idea that they are worthy, and that it comes from that. It's difficult for me sometimes just to calm down and say, "It's okay. You can't get to everybody."

But the other thing is that when you do this, something comes back to you, whether you ask for it or not. It's almost like a heart song—you're both in tune with each other. I think what I would like my practice to continue doing is to keep seeing, to keep looking, to look beyond whatever the norm is. It's like when you love somebody and someone asks you if they're beautiful—your automatic reaction is, "Oh yes." You don't even know what they look like anymore. You see them beyond that.

A lot of what you have taught me over the years is the joy of this, the humor of it and the joy. And I would like to continue that. Even if some people would think it's somewhat Pollyanna-ish, it doesn't matter, because I want to confirm what you said: sometimes you can say it to one person and make such a significant difference that it's worth all the risks you took to put yourself out there. So thank you again, because you've changed my life.

I just want to take a breath. Listening to what you say really touches me. It's beautiful. I can feel how you do that with people and how it shines back and forth—that they shine back to you from it. And then I start to think, "Gosh, I wish there were some people I'd like you to talk to in this world before they do more harm." So that the beauty you see in them could, as you do, actually be known to them too.

What a marvelous thing to do. Like that last question—the idea is not to perfect yourself; it's really to perfect your love.

And I think this is kind of a place where we'll stop tonight, because I can't say anything beyond this. It feels like this is a beautiful place for us all to rest in—to hear you speak of seeing the secret beauty in those around you and then giving the gift of speaking to them, letting them know that. And maybe that's what we can do for one another more than anything: to create true community, to create a community of love on this earth. And then we start to act in different ways and tend to the planet and tend to one another.

So I thank you for that, and so much thanks to everyone who spoke, to all of those of you who attended. Just to begin the spring, to take a pause, and to look around, and then to sense: What is our best intention, our deepest intention? What are the seeds that we are planting and watering? What do we want to water to make things beautiful, joyful?

Thank you all for coming. Thanks for those who spoke. Take good care of yourself, and enjoy the spring amidst it all.

Good night.

And so we pause to look around, to sense what is our best intention, our deepest intention. What are the seeds that we are planting and watering? What do we want to cultivate to make things beautiful, joyful?

Thank you all for coming, and thanks to those who spoke. Take good care of yourselves and enjoy the spring amidst it all.

CHAPTER 114

Joy (Muditā)

Jack Kornfield · 58 min

> *In this profound teaching on muditā (sympathetic joy), Jack Kornfield illuminates why joy is not merely pleasant but essential for awakening—one of the seven factors of enlightenment in the Buddha's path. Drawing from the Buddha's instruction to "live in joy, in love, even among those who hate," Kornfield addresses the resistance many practitioners feel toward allowing themselves happiness amidst world suffering.*
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> *Kornfield weaves together the Four Noble Truths with the practice of the brahmavihāras (divine abodes), showing how muditā emerges naturally when we quiet the mind and return to what he calls "the child of the spirit"—our innate capacity for wonder and delight. He recounts the Buddha's pivotal memory before enlightenment: recalling childhood joy under a rose apple tree, which revealed the middle path between grasping and aversion. Through stories of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu laughing together despite profound suffering, a Maryknoll sister whose crippled hands became instruments of deeper compassion, and a revolutionary activist who chose radical happiness, Kornfield demonstrates that joy and engaged service are not opposites but companions.*
>
> *The teaching offers practical wisdom for daily life: that beauty and delight are moral obligations rather than luxuries, that sharing joy multiplies it, and that approaching service from love rather than guilt or anger transforms both giver and receiver. As poet Jack Gilbert writes, "We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world." Kornfield invites practitioners to touch their own magic moments of childhood wonder, recognizing that this joyful awareness remains accessible in every moment of stillness.*

So it's a pleasure to welcome you back after that meditation. A couple of things to say about that practice: for some people it's natural, but for others mudita is actually unfamiliar. They can go to compassion or loving-kindness or a peaceful heart, but joy seems unfamiliar or foreign. It brings up its opposite.

You know, why should I feel joyful? So many terrible things are happening in the world, or to myself. And Mara will come—Mara who tempts the Buddha and attacks the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, saying, "What right do you have to feel this?" And if resistance and difficulty arise, the response is to become curious, to say, "Oh, Mara, what is

it that you want to tell me? Are you afraid of joy? What are you afraid of, my friend? Are you judging the joy?" Bring a curious and loving heart, even to the resistance that comes. Even to Mara: may you too be joyful.

Tonight, as usual, I'd like to offer some teachings. They're not so much something for you to remember or take notes on—no exam afterward. They're really a reminder to your heart, to your deeper understanding. And if they touch you in some way or remind you of what's important, beautiful. And if they don't, if they don't seem right in some way, trust that and let them go. Let yourself listen as a meditation and sense what it is that wants to be nourished in yourself.

Here are the instructions from the Buddha speaking of joy. He instructs: Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate. Live in joy, in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, be still, quiet the mind, tend the heart. Free from fear and clinging, know the sweet joy of living in the way.

That's a kind of wild instruction—to find joy even among hatred or illness or those who are troubled and in conflict. Let's talk about this.

Last month, when I did the Monday talk, I talked about springtime and tending the garden of the heart, a sense of renewal, and how much we need it because we're still in the middle of the viral pandemic. We're in the middle of the terrible military coup and takeover in Burma and endless wars elsewhere. We're in the middle of the climate crisis and the very deep crisis for racial and economic justice. These are the first noble truths of the Buddha—that there is suffering to be seen and acknowledged. And the noble truth that speaks of the causes: greed, hatred, fear, ignorance. These are the causes of war and racism and climate destruction.

But the beautiful and important thing is that these are not the end of the story. From suffering and greed and hatred and fear, we can also shift our whole identity and find well-being, release, freedom. This is possible for us and for those around us.

"Oh, nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember that inner nobility that was born in you, the fundamental dignity that is who you really are.

A poem from William Stafford called "A Story That Could Be True"—Stafford was one of our great poets:

If you were exchanged in the cradle and your real mother died without telling the story, then no one knows your name. And somewhere in the world your father is lost and needs you, but you are far away. He can never find how true you are, how ready. And when the great winds come and the robberies of the rain, you stand in the corner shivering. The

people who go by, you wonder at their calm. They miss the whisper that runs any day in your mind: "Who are you really, wanderer?" And the answer you have to give, no matter how dark and cold the world is around you: Maybe I'm a king.

Maybe, if you were exchanged in the cradle—maybe I'm a king.

Or Rumi, who puts it this way: In springtime, it's all right for a beggar to brag that she's a queen today. And this is us.

We practice mindfulness and compassion, and this allows us to see and tend the world accurately and wisely. Mudita, or joy, is a factor of enlightenment. It's necessary for awakening. More than tending the world, it allows us to appreciate the world. Mudita means joy and shared joy—joy with the joy of life itself.

And of course, I think of the exemplars of joy, like the Dalai Lama. There's this remarkable book that many of you have seen called *The Book of Joy*, conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu about why they can be so happy after all the suffering they've seen—apartheid and deaths in South Africa, and the suffering in Tibet with the loss of monasteries and the burning of the culture. And they sit there and they laugh.

People go to hear the Dalai Lama. I don't think they go so much for those remarkable but often somewhat inscrutable Tibetan philosophic teachings that he offers. I think people go by the thousands to see somebody who has suffered and gone through so much yet can still have so much joy. They go to hear him laugh.

He and Tutu in this dialogue are teasing one another and playing. At one point, Tutu tries to take the Dalai Lama's hat off and they wrestle. Then the Dalai Lama says, "Hey, we're supposed to be holy men. The cameras are on—stop that!"

They talk about what's going to happen when they die. The Dalai Lama says, "I suppose when you die, you go to heaven." And Tutu asks, "Well, where are you going to go?" "Maybe hell," says the Dalai Lama. "I thought you were supposed to be reborn," said Tutu. The Dalai Lama replied, "Well, it's not certain. I better be nice to the Chinese, because they're going to pick my next incarnation."

You see them bantering in the midst of all the things they've been through. There is somehow this delight that they carry, one that lights up the room.

But it's not just them. I've been hanging out with my two-and-a-half-year-old grandson. Nini—that's Trudy, my beloved—and I go to visit him. I'm Baba Jack. Nini and Baba Jack come, and I've been bringing balloons, which he likes a lot. I have a whole big

pouch of different sizes and colors, ones with strings on them. He will say in his little cute two-year-old voice, "Baba Jack, blow up balloon! Blow up! Blow it up!" So I pick a balloon. "What color?" "Oh, red!" I put it to my mouth and he's watching me, and I start to blow—and his eyes get big and his cheeks puff out. As he watches, it's as if he's trying to blow the balloon at the same time. It gets bigger and bigger and his eyes get bigger and bigger. Then he will say when it's all blown up, "Now fly it!" And I have to let go and let it fly up in the air. Or, "Now, Baba Jack, now pop it!" He gets very excited when the balloon pops. "Now do another one!"

It's just so amazing to see how simple the light can be for a child. This is that child of the spirit that was born into each of us.

Mudita, as part of the Brahma Viharas, as part of the awakened heart, is our capacity to find joy, to feel delight and happiness, rapture, well-being, pleasure. In Thai, it's called *jai pong sai*, which means a lightness of heart.

Why is it a factor of enlightenment, a necessary element in awakening? Because joy arises with the freedom to step beyond the small and separate sense of self. The enemies to mudita are jealousy—"Do I have as much joy as someone else?"—or comparing, or feeling guilty that I shouldn't feel joy, as if there's not enough joy to go around.

As one of the divine abodes, the abodes of the gods, the quality of joy invites us to openness, to wonder, to mystery. It's said in the mythology that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he shifted away some paces from that great Bodhi tree—you can still go find its granddaughter, this huge tree in the temple in Bodh Gaya, the granddaughter of his tree of awakening, with the giant tree and temple there where you can sit under it. He moved away from his seat under the tree, and for seven days he contemplated the tree with gratitude, simply enjoying the fact that there he was, free now and awake. The tree had held him and cared for him, and how joyful his heart was.

After that, he got up, and for forty-five years he wandered the dusty roads of India, offering the teachings of well-being and freedom of heart and joy wherever he went.

This is how it happens. You find joy, and then you find yourself opening for forty-five years. Or there's Rumi, who wandered around, and his poems are called the *Divan*, the ocean of poetry—one hundred thousand poems. He didn't write them down. Some of his students were there with him, writing them as he wandered in joy, like the Buddha spreading it across the dusty roads from Afghanistan to Turkey, across the Middle East. Dancing lyrics, joyful spirit, profound peace.

Mudita invites us to open a channel to joy and delight and creativity. Joy arises, like the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree, from following the heart's silent source. When we get still, as we did in the meditation, and the mind quiets and the heart opens, we remember: live in joy, even among the troubled. Out of that stillness, there is a silent source of something beautiful that wants to come through every one of us—a tending of the garden, a tending of one another.

As the composer Puccini said, "I've done nothing. I've simply written down what I heard from the gods." Mozart expressed the same understanding—he didn't compose things so much as get quiet, hear the symphony, and write it down as quickly as he could.

Joy arises from following the heart's silent source. And it's uplifting. Whenever we stay connected to our deepest love and our joy arises—whether it's in parenting or building or teaching or healing or making a conscious business or tending the world—when we get quiet and listen more deeply, that innate joy is there within us. The possibility of having a joyful heart is present in every moment.

And it's possible to see joy everywhere. The world in joy. Yes, it has its troubles. Yes, it has its ocean of tears. But it also has unbearable beauty and mystery. As Walt Whitman writes, "A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels." Just the existence of a being like a little mouse—with its tail and ears and eyes—where does this all come from?

Wrens and warblers. There are all these birds around my house now in spring. We're living on a lagoon as part of the San Francisco Bay, and it's filled with pelicans and Canadian geese and all kinds of birds and ducks. And then I look, and if you look everywhere, there's this amazing life happening. I was hiking up the hills behind Spirit Rock and suddenly saw this bright red bug I'd never seen before in thirty years of hiking in those hills. It was tracking its way across the path, and then there was another one following. I thought, wow, they have their own community, their own life, and I don't even know about it. There are one million different species of beetles—bright beetles and luminous beetles. Of course we might be concerned about climate change and what's happening to the beetles, but to understand it, we first have to see the mystery of them all.

"When the eyes and ears are open, the leaves on the trees become like pages in the holy books," the Sufis say. And in Zen, it's said, "When the temple bell stops, the sound keeps coming out of the flowers." This is mysterious.

If I take my little grandson out to see something marvelous—the ocean or the Grand Canyon—he's as likely to look down and pick up a little red pebble and say, "Baba Jack, look at this amazing pebble!" And there's the Grand Canyon or the ocean behind him. Because everything is amazing to him.

"Oh nobly born," say the Buddhist texts, "remember who you really are, the child of the spirit." Oh nobly born, the one who has the potential to live with an awakened and joyful heart no matter what.

As the mystic Thomas Merton writes, "Life is simple. We're living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and the divine is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true."

So you ask, where can I find enlightenment? In the Himalayas? In some great temple in Thailand or Japan? And the poet Kabir says, "It is nearer than near."

You know the stories of the astronauts who return from traveling around the Earth or even to the moon—sometimes with considerable danger, unsure whether they'll make it back. When they land, especially those who land back on the Earth, one of the first gestures some of them make is to kneel down and kiss this earth. Because when you're far away up there, circling the Earth in your spacecraft or circling the moon, you see that blue globe that has everything on it. Everything that matters—all the people and art and history and love and community and conflict and beauty and tragedy. Everything that makes the great novels. All of humanity. The sequoia trees and the whales and the polar bears, the noteworthy species and the millions of beetles and insects and worms in the fields, the smell of spring and the coldness of winter. They look and they say, "Oh, I want to go home." They kiss the earth. It's such a miracle to be here.

So awakening is really a shift of perception—to see this with a joyful heart.

Here's Rumi again: "Do not sit long with sadness, my friends. When you go to a garden, do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time with roses and jasmine." Yes, there are thorns in this world. Yes, the garden needs to be tended. But do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time with roses and jasmine. This is that amazing shift of perception—to see the mystery where you are, where we are.

I remember hearing about a university class in sensory awareness. When it came to exam time, after people had been learning to pay careful attention to their body, to other people, to the circumstances around them, here was the final exam.

You know, there were forty students in a room and a big basket of oranges. Each student was invited to take an orange and sit down and write for twenty minutes what they observed about it—the stippled color and the little dimple here, how it ended, whether it was completely round or had a flat side, what it smelled like, what it felt like under their fingers. All the things that, if you took your time to live with an orange, you could see. And because they'd been training, they really looked, and they wrote.

But that wasn't the conclusion of the exam. That was only half of it.

The second part: the oranges were collected and placed in a big bowl, mixed up, and then set out around that bowl on the counter. You had to go up and find your orange and see how long it took. It wasn't a race, but an invitation. And as the story was told to me, when people found their orange—which they did, because they'd looked so closely—it was almost like, "Oh, I found my orange! I found my friend." There's something joyful about being present for every small thing in life as it presents itself.

André Gide says, "Know that joy is rare, and more difficult and more important than sadness. And once you make this discovery, you must embrace joy as a moral obligation."

Your attention, your care, your mindfulness—all these things we've been teaching over the years—is an invitation to this factor of enlightenment. Tutu, the Dalai Lama, whoever you think of: a joyful heart. Those who are awakened.

But what about the ocean of tears? What about the First Noble Truth?

I was sitting at a very small retreat for teachers some years ago with Thich Nhat Hanh, and I may have told this story in recent months. As he was teaching, he talked about smiling, putting a little Buddhist half-smile on your face. I felt a tremendous sadness, a kind of grief, even though I was trying to smile as he spoke of the half-smile.

Then we sat down and had lunch, just a small handful of us. I was confused. I said to him, "Thầy"—the word for teacher, respectfully—"I was in there and you said for us to smile, but I felt this great grief. I don't know if it was my sadness or yours."

He looked at me for a time, gazed at me, and then shook his head. He said, "I've seen so much suffering." I'm sure he was referring, among other things, to all the work he did in the School for Social Services that he created with young people during the Vietnam War—how half the young people who came to follow him and be with him and do this beautiful peacemaking in the middle of war, how half of them were killed. If you can imagine bringing young people together and then having them killed.

And he said, "I've seen so much suffering. I have to teach joy."

Here's a poem I find magnificent, though it's tough also, demanding. It's by Jack Gilbert, one of our great poetic masters who died in recent years. Listen to it:

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they're starving somewhere else, with flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that's what the gods want as well. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned orange and black so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they've known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure seeking, but not delight, not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit that there will be music despite everything.

If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil.

It's a really powerful statement and a call to the heart—to live like Tutu and the Dalai Lama and those great joyful beings, the exemplars of what's possible.

This is the child of the spirit that was born in each of you, as we touched in that opening meditation. Every being—oh nobly born—is born with an innocence, and the child of the spirit can see with eyes of joy.

In the story, the archetypal history of the Buddha, as he was seeking enlightenment, struggling and fasting and doing all kinds of ascetic practices that got him nowhere in the long run—just skinnier and more weary of fighting against himself—he sat one day against a tree quietly, and all of a sudden a memory arose in him, an insight. One of the most important insights, actually part of the opening of enlightenment for him.

He remembered being in his father's garden, in his father's field, during the spring plowing festival. His father being a local king, there he was, seated under a rose apple tree, watching the festivities and the beginning of the planting of seeds, the plowing of the fields. And as he did, a huge contentment came over him. As he closed his eyes, he felt this innate joy as a child, this wonder and well-being, and his mind became silent and absorbed in joy and peace.

The Buddha remembered this.

He thought, "I've been doing the wrong thing. I've been fighting against myself. I forgot that joy and well-being is in me already, is my birthright." And this was the realization of what he later—shortly later, in the next step of his enlightenment—called the middle path: to let go of fighting against the world on one side and to let go of grasping on the other, but to be present with that deep stillness and innocence and presence of a child.

Let yourself reflect for a moment on those magic moments of your own childhood, what that was like when the world was new, when morning has broken like the first morning, to quote that Cat Stevens passage, or maybe it's a biblical passage. Remember it, because it's in you.

When I remember the day that I got let out of the hospital, I was eight years old and I'd had polio and was paralyzed and couldn't walk. And somehow, miraculously, the paralysis lifted. I was looking out of the window of my hospital room, quite scared because of all these doctors and priests and everybody who came to visit me, and the spinal taps with this horse needle, and just all kinds of terrible things. I just wanted to be able to walk again. I saw this green patch of grass out my window, and then my movement came back. I was no longer paralyzed. I got home and I ran to the park next to our house and I tumbled over and over and I put my face in the grass and I just became so happy.

What were your magic moments? They were there. They had to be. No matter what you went through, the child of the spirit is indomitable. It's innate. It's who you are.

So there's a longing in everyone for this beauty, this joy, this love, and it changes everything when we tune into it.

There was a remarkable experiment, if you will, done in London some years ago in a neighborhood that was poor and rundown, where there was a lot of crime. And of course, as you can imagine, sadly, that was the result as well of economic injustice and racism and all these kinds of things that are striking children who are born in that neighborhood who are innocent, like every child saying, "Why is this happening?" Why don't we tend those children? We ask ourselves, that's what's needed now—that every child be born and that spirit in them be honored.

But in this strange kind of social experiment or study, two parallel streets, boulevards, about eight blocks apart, high crime, great poverty—the crime comes because there's nothing. On one of these streets, they fixed the street lights and added more to them. They freshly painted the lines on the street. They swept the street. They

sent street sweepers and cleaners once a week. They repainted things. They repotted the plants that were supposed to be along the street, and they made it more beautiful. They did nothing else.

The neighborhood was the same. The oppression was the same, enough to break your heart. The economic injustice, the racism, all there. But something remarkable happened. The level of crime on the street that was made beautiful dropped by half. And I would think that it's because beauty reminded people that they could care about themselves and one another even in the suffering. Whether they knew it or not—nothing was told to anybody, it just was done—there's a longing, even unconsciously, to live with beauty.

It turns out that beauty comes alive, joy comes alive when it's shared. That's why mudita is called shared joy.

I remember when my daughter was young, when the Golden Gate Bridge still took tolls before there were the automatic electronic fast track. One of our favorite things was we'd go over the Golden Gate Bridge regularly, and she said, "Daddy, pay for the car behind us." You remember when that was fashionable? So I'd go to the toll booth and I'd give my whatever it was, five, six dollars, and I'd say, "Oh, here, here's for the car behind us." Then we'd go through and she'd say, "Go slow, daddy." So I wouldn't speed up a lot, and she'd watch the next car go through and the smile on the driver's face. They'd be told, "Oh, the car in front of you paid for you." Sometimes she would wave at them or they'd wave at us. And it brought so much joy, that simple action.

You know, recently in Texas, there was that huge storm that put out the electricity and power and travel for that ice storm and cold storm for almost a week or longer.

And in Plano, Texas, there was a restaurant called Bella Italiano run by Ari and Benere Isufash. I think he was from Kosovo, but it was an Italian restaurant—perhaps some kindred spirit connecting Kosovo and Italy. People were hungry and cold. They couldn't cook, couldn't heat themselves. And what they did at this restaurant, at Bella Italiano, was say, "Come and get food for free." They served hundreds of meals—huge pots of spaghetti sauce and spaghetti, huge trays of lasagna. They said, "People are hungry, they can't cook food, come and eat." And you can imagine, it wasn't just the joy of those families and those children, by the hundreds. It illuminated the whole community.

When we're still and let go of our fears and self-absorption, our plans and our tears, when our heart becomes peaceful in the mystery, then our actions and responses become joyful and virtuous. Like a lovely flower, said the Buddha, bright but scentless, are

the fine but empty words of one who does not mean what they say. But like a bright and fragrant flower, the fine and truthful words are like perfume that rises to the gods. There's something so beautiful in caring for one another, in the shared joy and in the integrity of taking care of one another. And that's in you from the beginning.

Albert Camus says a person's life is a slow trek to reclaim those moments in their childhood when their heart first opened. I think at best, meditation is exactly that. It's an invitation to quiet the mind, to come back to a place of inner well-being or peace or wholeness in the midst of things, to have the loving awareness—the mindful, loving awareness—big enough to hold the ocean of tears and the unbearable beauty. And then to come to rest in this mystery of human incarnation.

This longing for beauty is there in everyone, irrespective of caste or race or creed or level in society, wherever you are. You can be in prison and it's still there. Oh nobly born, this is your true nature, and the heart shines.

About a week or so ago, I was part of a celebration event and conversation that I helped to foster for an organization called Combatants for Peace. It was comprised of former combatants from Palestine and Israel. In our group where so many people came to watch was Tully, who'd been an Israeli commando and commandant who had a whole battalion under him, and Osama, who'd been a Palestinian freedom fighter. All of them had seen battles where people were killed, had participated in it. And somehow they'd come to the place where we cannot keep killing children. We cannot kill one another on a land that we both live upon and revere. And you could feel the dignity, the moral authority they had to say, "Yes, we have seen this, we have participated, and we will no longer do so." It was really inspiring because it was their nobility shining.

In Japan, there is an art called kintsugi. And you may have heard of it. Kintsugi is the art of taking something that's broken—initially it might have been a beautiful tea cup or tea bowl or teapot, some piece of ceramic, though it can be other things—and if it falls and breaks, instead of throwing it away, lovingly putting it back together with gold filling in the cracks. The gold filling in the cracks shows that as it's all put back together, it has a new kind of wholeness. And as Leonard Cohen said, the cracks are where the light comes in.

In a book by Chris Cleave called *Little Bee*, he talks about kintsugi—not just as the Japanese craft for cups, but of course for us. "I ask you right here, please, to agree with me that a scar is never ugly. That is what the scar makers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agreement to defy them. We must see all scars as beauty, okay? This will be our secret." Because he'd been through a lot in his life. He says, "Because take it

from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means I survived." And you can feel the life force in that poem and the meaning. Growing strong in the broken places is the simple way of saying it. The nobility of the heart, no matter what we've been through.

A couple more stories to tell you as we wend our way toward the end of this teaching. This is from one of my favorite books ever, called *How Can I Help?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, full of gorgeous stories of service and love. It's about a nun who some years ago had volunteered as a Maryknoll sister to go and be a teacher in Peru, to go to some villages and towns where there weren't many teachers, to serve as a teacher for children because she'd taken vows as a sister to serve the world. But it was a very high village, at 13,500 feet. She said, "And then the illness happened."

Rheumatoid arthritis came, and more and more it began to cripple her hands and cripple her knees. The doctor said it was partly because of the altitude and that there was nothing to do about it. She went to see more doctors in Peru and Panama, and gradually it became clear that she needed to come back to the States for treatment.

She got good care. The doctors helped her somewhat, but it was quite clear that she couldn't go back high up in the mountains. She wanted to go back. She wept. She struggled. Self-pity, anger, discouragement, doubt. She wouldn't give up. Every day it seemed like she was losing. She had surgery at the Mayo Clinic. She did a great deal of prayer.

And then one day she realized: I can't go there as I had. I had to use my crippled hands in a different way. Maybe these crippled hands, these broken and cracked hands, could become sacred. They would be the compassionate hands of Jesus as much as the hands of the doctors and nurses that tended me.

So she went back and returned to Peru at a much lower altitude. Almost everything had changed. Most importantly, her attitude toward the people she was working with. She could feel their terrible poverty and pain in a whole new way from what she'd been through. In fact, it seemed she was seeing it for the first time. She wasn't there as a kind of white savior, a colonialist nun-teacher. She could really feel their poverty, how she'd rushed around trying to save people's problems, solve them without really seeing them —not seeing the pain in their faces, the insecure eyes, the nervous hands, all the expressions of struggle and beauty in their lives. It was only when suffering had actually touched her that she began to feel their conditions.

They said to her, "You're the same person you were before, but somehow you've changed." And her ministry changed. It became the ministry of walking together. She became more sensitive and maybe humble.

So then she started to work with what was around her. She began to work with those who were handicapped—but in Peru, handicapped children were hidden away. They were seen in some way as a reflection of their parents who might have done something bad or wrong. They were hidden.

She thinks of Juan, a polio victim at three who'd been hidden by his family in their small mud-brick house until they discovered him at age eight. His brother Julio took them home to see him one day. There was Juan, his twisted legs underneath him, scooting around a small dirt patio on a circular piece of rubber. His mother was suspicious and didn't want them to stay. A handicapped child meant she was being punished for something. She was ashamed.

And in this, you can feel the pain of every disabled person who's judged by others—how much sorrow that brings, and how unnecessary, to not look in their eyes and see them.

So they returned on several occasions to visit Juan. One time they found him all alone. His family, with the rest of the town, had gone to a religious procession. Of course, he'd never seen one. So they borrowed a bicycle, put Juan on it, and joined in the procession itself. It was his first time outside the house, the first time he'd looked at people from a level higher than the ground, his first procession. His parents were momentarily annoyed, but their attitude changed gradually.

And when they thought it right to raise the idea, they asked at the next town meeting if they could raise money to send Juan to Lima for physical therapy. Everyone liked the idea, and Juan went off to the big city. He had a long, hard struggle with much pain and effort, but one day he returned to the village. He was using braces and a cane. It was very hard for him to do, but as he began to walk down the streets to his home, people came out of their homes. They appeared from all over. They were cheering and clapping and followed him all the way home. It was so wonderful. It was Juan's second procession.

It's never too late to be joyful, to take even that which is pained and broken—like kintsugi—and say, let's let something more beautiful shine through it in our life, in our hearts.

And there was a woman in the group—Deborah was teaching meditation, compassion, and mindfulness—who'd had terrible trauma in her childhood, grown up in circumstances where there was addiction, people in and out of prison, other kinds of abuse. Somehow she survived it, got herself out of it, and managed to get herself through high school. But she became bitter.

And then she decided, "I have to change this world." She went from high school to community college and became an activist. She said, "I became a radical—radical for justice, radical for women, radical for those who'd been traumatized. I was a revolutionary." She became a mother with a couple of young children, and she was a revolutionary for parents, a radical fighting for all the things that mattered.

But she was also exhausted when she came to that retreat, to that group and those teachings. After some weeks of practicing mindful, loving awareness, of coming back home to herself, when people were asked in that circle what they were learning when they got quiet—what happened when they practiced compassion toward themselves and others, what happened when they tended their heart, when they looked at who they are and who they wanted to be—she raised her hand.

"I've been a radical," she said. "I got out of the worst circumstances. I got myself an education. I worked for the rights of women and the disabled. I worked for the rights of those who are poor, for children. I was a revolutionary and a radical." She paused. "And now—now I'm going to do something really radical. I'm going to let myself be happy."

After all that fight and struggle, letting herself get quiet and practice as you have, as we did tonight, she touched that deep stream the Buddha invites us into. Live in joy and love and peace, even amidst the trouble and turmoil. Live in the sweet joy of your own heart, the sweet joy of the way.

What would it be like for you to be joyful? To be really radical in your life, to own your joy? When you go into refugee camps, if you go depressed, it doesn't help those people you work with or support or care for or stand as an ally with. It's radical to be joyful. And joy doesn't mean we don't tend to the world. In fact, it allows us to show up with an open heart and be in solidarity, to stand up with others. It's called shared joy—for justice, racial justice, economic justice. Stand up for the earth. Stand up for the innocence and beauty of every child, for the dignity of every adult.

Think of a person who's the most cheerful and good-hearted you know. You could be like them. You could be.

When the great environmentalist and poet Gary Snyder was asked about climate change—remember, fifty years ago he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Turtle Island*. He was one of the prescient early voices for bioregionalism and caring for the climate. Someone said, "Gary, the world is falling apart. The oceans are rising. The temperature is getting hotter. The storms are getting bigger. There's so much we haven't learned to stop. What do we do? What advice do you have? You've been doing this for fifty years and you're a Zen elder as well. Tell us, please—how do we do this?"

Gary looked back and said simply, "Don't feel guilty. If you feel guilty, it's not a healthy way to operate. Don't do it out of guilt. Don't do it out of anger. Don't do it out of fear. Those are the very energies—fear and anger and guilt—that have caused the problems between humans. If you're going to save the earth, if you're going to care for it, do it because you love it." Let that be the force—love and joy.

One last poem for you, called "Camas Lilies":

Consider the lilies of the field, the blue banks of camas opening into acres of sky along the road, with the longing to lie down and be washed by that beauty. Of bathing—if you knew their usefulness, how the natives ground their bulbs for flour, how the settlers' hogs uprooted them, grunting in gleeful oblivion as the flowers fell.

And you—what of your rushed and useful life? Imagine setting it all down: papers, plans, appointments, everything. Leaving only a note: "Gone to the fields to be lovely. Be back when I'm through blooming."

Even now, unneeded and uneaten, the camas lilies gaze out above the grass from their tender blue eyes.

Even in sleep, your life will shine. Make no mistake, of course your work will always matter. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

So let's sit together. And we sit in the tenderness of joy, the sweet tenderness of joy of this mysterious life.

CHAPTER 115

Meditation: Joy (Muditā) | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 29 min

> *In this guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through the cultivation of muditā—one of the four brahmavihāras or divine abodes of the awakened heart. The practice begins with establishing a stable, gracious posture and softening the body from face to belly, allowing the heart to become receptive and tender.*
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> *The meditation unfolds through a progressive opening to joy: first visualizing someone dear and imagining their happiest childhood moments—running, laughing, playing—then extending wishes for their joy to increase and its causes to grow stronger. This expands to include additional loved ones, and beautifully turns reflexive as practitioners receive these same wishes from those they've blessed, placing a hand on the heart to truly take in the well-wishing for themselves.*
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> *Kornfield introduces the evocative image of the heart as a lighthouse or beacon, radiating joy in all directions to humans and non-humans alike across the earth. Throughout, he emphasizes maintaining a gentle half-smile as an embodied expression of muditā. The teaching reminds us that shared joy naturally uplifts our own hearts—that in wishing happiness for others, we open ourselves to the sweetness of joy. Kornfield encourages practitioners to make this practice their own, finding words and images that genuinely invite the heart to open.*

Let's begin with some meditation.

Please find a way to sit, as I will, that is stable and comfortable and at ease—where your body can rest on the earth with some sense of alertness, but also a graciousness, like the king or the queen on the throne. You take your seat.

When you're ready for this time, let your eyes close gently, or at least lower your gaze considerably, and direct your attention—this gift of awareness—to notice just now, this moment, this present moment, the state of your body and mind and heart. Perhaps take a couple of very deep, long breaths in and out, and with each breath, release whatever obvious tension or tightness you can.

Now let's invite a deeper level of opening. Bring your attention to your eyes and face, and let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body now—buttocks and feet, the heaviness of gravity pulling you. Since you are met completely by the earth, by the chair, the floor, wherever you are, know that you are held by the earth. You can let go and be stable and steady just where you are on this earth in this moment, like a great tree. Let your belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness and compassion and tenderness.

Now, with this embodied presence, let's shift our attention. Tonight, the guided meditation will be one of muditā, or joy. We could pay attention more fully to our own breath and body and allow things to open and bloom like a flower with a kind attention—and you may be called to do that tonight on your own or at another time. For this evening, joy will be the topic, the theme, the energy.

As you sit now, gently letting the breath breathe itself and holding all the dimensions of your humanity—the ups and downs, the gain and loss—hold it all with a gracious heart.

Here is how to begin the practice of muditā, or shared joy. Let yourself think of someone who you care about quite a lot naturally, where there isn't a lot of conflict or difficulty. Picture them, remember them, see them in your mind's eye or hold them in your heart. When you think of this person for whom you naturally have affection, care, love, notice what happens as you bring them into your mind and heart. Perhaps a little half smile comes to your lips to see them.

Now let yourself imagine and picture their happiest moment as a child—running, tickling, laughing, playing. Let yourself see or feel or imagine that child of the spirit. Every child has had it, no matter how difficult the upbringing. See their joyful moments, their happiest time.

As you sense and envision the most joyful moments of their childhood—just the simplicity of running and laughing, playing—begin to wish them well:

May you be joyful.
May you remember that child of the spirit that was born in you.
May your joy increase.
And may the causes for happiness and joy grow stronger in your life.

May you remember your joy.
May you be joyful, happy.
May you remember the child of the spirit that was born in you.

May your joy increase day by day, year by year.
And may the causes for your joy and wellbeing and happiness grow strong.
May you live in joy.

Notice what it's like to invite the quality of joy, of shared joy, with this person you care about—how it uplifts your own heart, how it opens you to joy.

Now pick another person that you care about, someone easy to think of and not conflicted. Visualize them, remember them. Bring them into your mind's eye and your heart. Again, with a little half smile, the delight of seeing them, about to wish them joy.

As you see them, picture again their happiest moment as a child—laughing, playing, running, teasing, tickling, joyful, delighted. The joy that was born in them.

May you be joyful.
May you remember your joy, the child of the spirit born in you.
And as the years go on, may your joy increase.

And may the causes for your happiness, well-being, and great joy increase and grow strong. See them as joyful.

And again, keeping the half smile on the lips, imagine these two dear ones, ones you care about, now gazing back at you. See their eyes looking at you, smiling. They wish the same for you. They see you with their eyes and their heart.

And they say, "Do you remember your best moments as a child? Laughing, playing, running, delighting. You can remember."

And they gaze at you and say, "May you be joyful." Take it in—their wish is for you. They say, "May you remember your joyful spirit. May your joy increase over the years. And may the causes for your happiness and well-being and joy grow strong."

Here are these two gazing at you, wishing you so well, smiling with you. And you put your hand on your heart and you receive it and wish for yourself: May I be joyful. May I remember the joyful spirit born into me, the child of the spirit. And may the joy of my heart increase over the years. And may the causes of happiness and well-being and joy grow stronger in my life.

Rest in this field of joy—of these two that you love or care for and their care for you. Breathe gently in the space of joy. Feel it in your body and in your heart and mind, the sweetness of joy.

Now let yourself think of another person or two to whom you want to share and send the mudita of joy, of well-wishing. You'll know who. Let another person come to heart and mind. As you picture and remember and think of them, see them as a child—their best day, their most joyful spirit, their happiest time laughing and playing—and extend the well-wishing of joy: May you too be joyful. May you remember this spirit of joy born into you. And may your joy increase over the years. And may the causes for happiness and well-being and joy grow strong in your life so you live well and enjoy.

The birds are singing along with us their songs of joy and happiness, springtime.

Now let yourself imagine that your heart is like a lighthouse, a beacon, and you can shine from joy out with a half smile on your lips. The well-being of joy radiates in every direction to touch the beings around—yes, the birds and the animals, and yes, the humans, young and old and middle, all the human beings in their different stages of life—with this beautiful well-wishing: May you be joyful. May you remember your joyful spirit.

Send out across the world to your loved ones and friends, to beings across the earth, human and non-human: May your joy increase over the years. And may the causes for happiness and well-being and joy grow stronger and stronger in your life.

Sit now silently for a time. Radiate joy with a half smile on your lips and the well-wishing in every direction, or let different people come to mind and see their child of the spirit. Become the beacon of joy as you breathe in and out gently, as you rest in the joyful heart.

May you be joyful. May you remember your joyful spirit. May your joy increase over the years. And may all the causes for your happiness and well-being and joy grow stronger. May you live with a joyful spirit and a joyful heart.

When you're ready, let your eyes open gently.

This is one of the Brahmavihara, the divine abode practices—the practices of the awakened heart, shared joy. Remember it, use it, practice it when you will. Play with it, make it your own. Sometimes these words aren't the right ones, and you have to find that which invites your heart and your joy to open. It's there for you. We'll talk more about it in a little bit.

[Note: This final section contains only the closing meditation guidance already present in the preceding context, followed by administrative/housekeeping content about breaks and support information. There is no additional dharma content to transform into written form.]

CHAPTER 116

Q&A: Joy (Muditā) | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 18 min

> *In this intimate Monday night Q&A session, Jack Kornfield engages in real-time dialogue with practitioners facing profound challenges. The talk centers on how muditā (sympathetic joy) can be accessed even amid fear, illness, and confrontation with mortality. Through guided meditation and direct inquiry, Kornfield helps a practitioner working through a health crisis discover that the same capacity that allowed her to move through layers of remorse to reconciliation can also hold the fear of death.*
>
> *Kornfield draws on the Buddha's encounter with Māra under the Bodhi tree as a template for meeting our own inner demons. Rather than fleeing from fear, he guides practitioners to acknowledge Māra's presence with the words "I see you, Māra"—recognizing that fear, while powerful, is not our deepest identity. He emphasizes that loving awareness is vast enough to hold all experiences, including the most terrifying ones. The teaching echoes Thích Nhất Hạnh's instruction to "serve Māra some tea" rather than resist or flee.*
>
> *A second dialogue explores intergenerational trauma, as a practitioner shares the weight of carrying his German parents' World War II experiences. Kornfield introduces the concept of epigenetics—how trauma passes through generations—while reminding him that we are "only German on our parents' side." Our deeper nature is the "nobly born" awareness that can witness suffering without being consumed by it. The session concludes with practical wisdom: rather than trying to fix the entire world, we can mend the fabric of our immediate community through simple, reliable acts of kindness—and that is enough.*

Let's have a little conversation. We'll take a few questions or dialogues. What's on your heart? What has this touched in you? What is it that you'd like to open or bring forth—your experience, your questions?

Kristen: When you asked what it would look like for us if we embodied our joy, I think for me it has something to do with being less afraid of death. I'm going through a complex kind of health crisis, and there's a lot of fear. I have had this experience on retreat before—kind of unrelated, but an experience of entering into really just layers and layers and layers of remorse, and feeling so much joy in the remorse. It was deeply painful but very beautiful. I feel like for me, if I had this kind of trust that I can enter fully into the fear that I'm feeling, it would be very freeing. I just wondered if you had any reflections or reinforcement for that.

First of all, thank you for the realness of your question. Already it has so much wisdom in it, because there you were on retreat and you touched a place where you went through the remorse itself to a place of acceptance in the heart of joy—to say, all right, I can be with this. You remember that you did that. And it's pretty amazing that you could, because people run away from that.

So now Mara has come, like Mara does under the Bodhi tree, and says, "Okay, baby, you dealt with remorse. I'm going to give you a bigger one. How about death?" Right? You're sick anyway. You're frightened. "I'm going to come as fear."

So close your eyes for a moment. Take a couple of breaths and feel the tenderness that's there in you. Even as you describe and remember going through those layers of remorse until you came to a place of joy—what did that joy feel like? Keep your eyes closed. Can you say?

Kristen: Oh, yeah. It felt like reconciliation. It felt like a return to...

Stay with it. Keep your eyes closed. You said this remorse felt like—use that word again.

Kristen: It felt like reconciliation.

Yes, like reconciliation. All right, now close your eyes one more time. And feel that reconciliation. Even for all the regret and all the remorse, you have that.

And now Mara comes and says, "Okay, I'm going to show you death now. Your body—it's going to grow old at some point. You're going to have to face death. That's going to happen. It happens to everyone. So I'm going to try and scare you."

And you feel Mara coming, saying, "Oh, it's scary, it's scary."

And now you remember. You say, "I see you, Mara. I see you trying to scare me. But I remember the reconciliation. I remember how I can go through all of this and find a joy anyway."

Remember what that feels like in your body. And notice what it's like when Mara comes and tries to scare you. What do you see? What do you feel?

When Mara is present, there's so much closing. And there's a desire to flee myself, just run away.

Yes, natural. Mara scares you. "I want to run away. It's too painful." You say, "Mara, you're really scary. I want to run away from you."

But now you're like the Buddha who sat there, who felt the reconciliation and the joy of going through everything difficult. And now Mara's saying, "All right, I'm upping the game."

And you say, "I see you, Mara. I feel you. The fear is hard. It's scary. I see the closing and the clinging." You notice all that with a kind heart. "And I'm not going to abandon my kindness. I can even have kindness for you, Mara. We're in this together."

Bring in the whole feeling of compassion for your humanity and all you're going through—and the deep knowledge that when you go through the remorse and the pain and the fear that Mara presents, the loving awareness that you are can hold it all. Feel it. Stay with it.

How are you doing with it?

I'm grateful that you said this thing about Mara upping the ante, because I can see how this could be a gift for me—to encounter some aspects of reality more fearlessly, more directly.

We all have to do it. Mara comes to everyone. He wasn't just in India 2,500 or 2,600 years ago. He happens to live in Des Moines, and Marin County, and in Plano, Texas. Mara gets around.

And Mara will come and say, "I'm going to scare you." And you say—this is what the Buddha said when Mara appeared—"I see you, Mara. I see your stories. I feel you. I feel your fear, your anger, all those stories that you tell. I see who you are."

But that place you found in yourself can say, "I see you, and I know something deeper."

You know this—deeper than remorse. And you already found it. I trust that you know this.

Yes, you lose it. That's fine. We all lose it. Everybody loses it. But it doesn't go away. It's like the joy—it's there underneath.

So live your days. And Mara will come. And as Thich Nhat Hanh says, serve Mara some tea.

Say, "All right, I know you come around regularly, and you're scary. You put on your scary costume, and death is terrifying. But who I am is the awakened one. I'm the one who knows that yes, those stories are just stories, and my heart is big enough to hold all of this."

It's a fun practice. I mean, it's very hard and painful—you're sick, and you're thinking, "I might die," and Mara comes. But you're not dying right now. You might as well have a good time while you can.

Let me share one more question, from Stephen.

"Hi, Jack. I guess first of all, I just want to thank you. You've been my teacher for twenty years, and I really thank you. And even tonight, it's like every time there's a new opening.

"My question was kind of answered before it got to me, but I'll share. My parents came from Germany right after the war, and my father—I grew up with all these stories of just the terrible destruction and inhumanity. And the terrible guilt of not knowing what to do, or what else he could have done.

"It's plagued me in a couple of ways. One is this feeling that I should be more engaged, that there are all these horrible things in the world and I should know about them and be involved. And at the same time, I get so overwhelmed with rage and sadness and everything. I want to continue my spiritual growth, and for so long it seemed like I needed to put those two together, but they seemed diametrically opposite—like I couldn't do both.

"I just got off of a twenty-eight-day retreat, and the nun who led it said one of the things you need to do is become harmless, helpful, kind, and reliable. And that starts in your own heart, with yourself. So during this retreat, it was about always coming back and asking, 'How can you be there for yourself?'

"That started a process. I used to play this game from my father, I guess—after all the things he lost—this game of 'What can't they take away from me?' And during the retreat, it was like every longing, every everything—it was like, 'Okay, they can take that too. They can take that too.' It got to the point where I was sitting there asking, 'What if I can't move my body anymore?' And just asking, 'Can I still make this a friendly place?' Something you said tonight, in this latest answer, really opened something. I feel like I got that last little bit—this thing of joy, that when I don't know what else to do, to look for that. So I really want to thank you."

There's so much beauty in what you describe. And as you said, you've in some way answered the very thing that you wrestle with. Let me add a couple of things, just like icing on your good cake.

First, you know that you carry the epigenetics of World War II. It's in your cells and in your body in ways that are passed on. And now neuroscience and genetics shows that.

So that's part of the suffering that you carry. But then, as Ram Dass said—and I often tell this story because he was asked about being Jewish—he said at some point, "Yeah, but remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." And you're only German on your parents' side. But the other side of you is the nobly born, the one who knows, the carrier of wisdom that you're finding now in yourself.

So it's not that you don't have that. The epigenetics brings you the rage and overwhelm. You feel all the stuff that was there—you can't not. But it's not who you are. That's only your parents' side, not the nobility, the true side that you are.

And then there's that teaching you mentioned from this retreat about being helpful and kind and harmless to people, and reliable. We get overwhelmed when we think of all the sufferings in the world. But to think that you have to change them—for any of us, that would be kind of egotistical. "I'm going to fix the world." Damn, I can just barely fix dinner for my wife in time, and now I'm supposed to fix the whole world?

So instead, close your eyes just for a minute. Let yourself think or imagine some small thing—you may be doing it already, or you could—helping at a local soup kitchen, or extending your help to people standing in line to get vaccinated as a volunteer, or attending something. Let yourself imagine that you could do something, that you could reach out your hand and mend the fabric of the community around you. Notice what happens when you reflect in this way. It's very simple. What do you notice?

"An opening, an opening in my heart, and a voice that says, 'Just enough.'"

Just enough. Yeah, it doesn't have to be the whole world. It can be your neighbors. It can be in your community. Reliable, kind at heart. If human beings do that, it changes the world. You change the world one gesture at a time, just as you've described. You already understand. This great Zen master I studied with, Daesung Sunim, this Korean Zen master—sometimes he would look at us and say, "You already understand." And what you've said is so beautiful. You're just remembering that you're only German on your parents' side, and something else knows a lot more. So thank you for that beautiful teaching in your question.

And with this, I think we will call the evening to a close. You've all been a very faithful and kind and attentive group of meditators. I know you well, and I feel your appreciation and love, and the love for one another. Some of you are on Zoom, and you can look in the tiles and see the other people. Send them a little metta and love. Look at

their eyes and wish them well. May the child of the spirit be well. And then send it out, because there are people watching on YouTube and Facebook—lots and lots of people. Now you get to send that spirit of joy. May you be joyful in the midst of it all. May your joy increase. May you be truly happy.

Let that sense of open-heartedness go in every direction. You're the beacon of it. You get to choose joy. And the beautiful thing is that we can garden the heart. We can grow what we tend to, and we can become that. This is part of what it means to awaken.

So thank you for your kind attention.

You can wave goodbye or send metta or blessings to one another.

And stay with us. Stay with the joy or beauty, whatever touched you. Keep it, and bring it alive in the days and weeks ahead.

Thank you, and good night to you all.

CHAPTER 117

The Compassionate Heart

Jack Kornfield · 54 min

> *In this heartfelt Vesākha talk, Jack Kornfield addresses the profound question of identity: Who are you, really? Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that one who is not identified with body, heart, and mind will not be seen by the king of death, Kornfield guides listeners toward recognizing their true nature as loving awareness—the witness consciousness that observes all experience without being bound by it.*
>
> *Kornfield weaves together wisdom from multiple contemplative traditions, including Thomas Merton's encounter with the Buddha statues at Poḷonnaruwa, the Zen teaching that "there is no trash" in people or things, and the moving story of Miss Okamoto, who transformed her fear of death into joyful presence through understanding that we are born and die in each moment. The talk illuminates how the Buddha walked in Nibbāna for 45 years after his enlightenment—not because Nibbāna is elsewhere, but because freedom is found right here, in recognizing the one who knows.*
>
> *The practical implications are profound yet accessible: we can hold our struggles—whether pandemic anxieties, aging parents, or personal difficulties—with greater spaciousness when we remember our essential nature. As Suzuki Roshi taught, "You're perfect just as you are, and there's still room for improvement." This isn't about passive acceptance but about tending the garden of the world with what Kornfield calls "bliss-bestowing hands"—acting from freedom and love rather than grasping and fear. The talk concludes with an invitation to transform even mundane activities into what Morinaga Roshi called "the samādhi of play."*

Welcome back from the break. I took a little break and had a drink and a piece of chocolate, so I'm happy for both of those. And mostly I'm happy that we got to practice together.

I want to remind you that these trainings and practices, like the compassion meditation we just did, need to be individualized. Work within your own heart and mind to find the language and the images that most naturally work for you. Trust yourself in this.

The teachings I'd like to offer tonight are not something you have to remember and take notes for—there's no quiz coming later. They're really a reminder to your heart, to your understanding of things that are important. Listen in that way. If they touch you and remind you of something beautiful, wonderful. If they seem not right or off base, just let them go.

So here we are in May 2021. When we sit and meditate—in general, not just doing the compassion practice, but the practice of mindfulness itself, which the Buddha spoke of as all-helpful—we take our seat in this human form, halfway between heaven and earth. With mindfulness, the point is not to create a special meditative experience. Those may come or may not; they come and go. The point is actually to open to the mystery of our human incarnation—to gaze with the eyes, the inner eyes, and the heart at the unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears that make up human life.

I think we're all especially aware of this in the past year-plus of the pandemic, which in some places is winding down—hallelujah—but in other places is not. I went to see my grandson, who's two and a half years old. It's so shocking. He's used to seeing Baba Jack on a little glass screen on the phone, and all of a sudden I'm a live person. And he is to me—it's like moving from virtual reality to the real thing. It's strange being back again, doing social things with vaccinated friends, still being tentative, trying to figure out how I want to live now after this year-plus of being sequestered.

Sadly, the reality is that the pandemic hasn't ended. I was traveling recently with Trudy and our dear friends Larry and Peerjit Brilliant. He's one of the world's great epidemiologists, working with the WHO and the administration. He made it clear that all the variants emerging in different parts of the world, the unvaccinated people in so many countries that haven't been given vaccines even though we could provide them, the huge spread in India and Brazil and Turkey—this will be with us for a long time. And "us" means us as human beings, because we can't isolate ourselves in one country or one continent and close our doors. We are all connected. We know this, but now the pandemic shows it in bright lights, in an unmistakable way.

But it's not just this huge change. There are the ongoing conflicts. I hear from friends in Burma and Myanmar because I've been engaged in trying to help in modest ways, and the situation is terrible. I hear from friends in Palestine and Israel, and it too is heartbreaking—living under rocket fire on all sides, the cruelty, the barbarity of it. And not just there: Syria, South Sudan, so many places in the world. What are we doing as human beings?

At the same time, there is also the incredibly deep need to sustain the movements for social justice and racial justice. The delusion and suffering from racism and injustice—it's very easy for us to slip back into the unconscious ways that have oppressed so many people and kept so many of us locked in separate consciousness. And I don't need to talk about climate change—or maybe I do, the whole time—but we're woven in that too, in this inescapable garment of destiny, as Dr. King said.

It's not just out there. It's our own personal lives, our own share of the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows: praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, birth and death. I have all these friends who are sick or dying, because I have a big circle of people who've been friends or colleagues or students—and maybe because I'm seventy-five years old and know a lot of other people in my age range. All of this happening.

So then there's a question with it all: How do we find a peaceful heart in the midst of beauty and catastrophe?

Our experience, our human experience, is not a mistake. As William Blake said, joy and woe are woven fine.

a clothing for the soul divine. When this we rightly know, through the world we safely go, for we were made for joy and woe.

There's a passage in Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic writer, that speaks of his visit to Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka in his Asian journals. Polonnaruwa is a temple where huge marble statues of the Buddha—seated and lying down—were carved out of a marble cliff. Giant statues with incredible beauty and a kind of spiritual power that Merton said he'd almost never seen in any other work of art, so powerful they are.

Walking across the green grass up to these statues, he said, "I gazed at these enormous faces and at the eyes of the awakened one, and I could feel in that gaze the consciousness that was seeing it all, seeing every possibility." A peace in the midst of it—the peace not of making an argument with anything, not the peace of emotional resignation, but the eyes of great compassion and of the emptiness that could see all things rising and passing in the space of consciousness itself, in the awakened heart.

It's said in the stories and texts that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he traveled and walked the dusty roads of India for forty-five years—teaching and meeting people, eating and gathering, creating a community. And all the time, he did so in nirvana.

What could that mean? Does that mean nirvana is someplace else? We hear that and think, "Oh, if I go to the Himalayas or have the right meditative experience or take the right substance, I'll get to someplace and that's nirvana." But there he was, trudging through the dusty roads in the rainy season, walking and sitting and speaking, being well and being sick, tending his community—all in nirvana. The compassionate one, the liberated one.

How does this relate to you? To me?

Here's the beginning of an answer, a key to understanding this and what it means for peace of mind and a free heart. And it's a question—maybe a strange question for that: Who are you? Or as Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, "What am I?" That was our practice, to sit and ask, "What am I? What am I?" Who are you? For this is the question of our human mysterious experience.

One of the things that's most remarkable about our human experience—in Buddhist psychology it's one of the key elements to understand—is that consciousness can create an identity that feels separate from the rest. Me, mine, in this head, in this body, in this bag of skin. We believe this is who we are. But the whole sense of identity is up for grabs. You're invited to look, to examine.

Suppose, for example, I hold up my two hands. This hand is me, and this hand is something I'm going to explore. I take this hand and feel it. I notice that one of the nails is a little long and needs to be clipped. The skin back here is a little rough or aging. In this case, this is me, Jack—Baba Jack, as I'm called by Desmond—and this is the object of my attention.

Now I switch and I feel with this hand. Now this is me, and I'm noticing the palm has these creases in it. It feels slightly moist, as if maybe in speaking and talking with you there's some sense—I don't feel anxiety, I really love doing this—but there's some sense that my body's engaged and alive somehow, and it's warm where I am. All of a sudden, it's me feeling this other thing.

We can put our identity anywhere. We can create ourselves in so many ways. But who are you? Who are we?

I remember sitting in a retreat hall with Ram Dass at one point. There was a man who'd come to practice, a quadriplegic lying on a bed that he could move with one hand a little bit to guide himself around. Ram Dass was teaching, and at one point the man indicated he wanted to speak. Someone went over and held the microphone to his mouth, and he said, "Ram Dass says we are not our body. Hallelujah!" You could feel the joy in him to know that he was not that quadriplegic body.

But who are we? Who are you? There are so many roles we identify with. Yes, we can identify with our body. We can identify with our emotions—but the thing is, they keep changing. We can identify with our thoughts, but that's more troublesome.

There are so many of them, and they're going in so many directions. And then we have our roles.

Here's a woman, a physician, a doctor. When she's in the hospital, she's treated as the doctor. But when she gets home, she's not the doctor anymore. She takes off the white coat and the stethoscope. She's mom to her three children—an entirely different role. And then she is a lover or a wife or a partner, another role. And then she calls her parents who are going through a hard time, and all of a sudden she's a daughter. And that week she goes to the school board that she's on, and people look at her: is she a liberal or a conservative? And then they look at her and try to see her ancestors. Are they from India or Nigeria or Ireland? What is her skin color? What is her sign—is she a Virgo, a Libra, a Sagittarius? And she could identify with all or any of these, as you can. But they're temporary, you know. They keep changing. Like water, they change—our roles, our thoughts, our emotions.

Alan Watts wrote a book called *On the Taboo of Not Knowing Who You Really Are*. He wrote about how in this society we're taught to pay attention outwardly, to consume, to compete, to be with others, to act in these ways, to get educated, to be in the drama of society. But we're never taught to turn back inside, to step out of our identities. And this is the place of freedom.

This was the Buddha wandering for forty-five years across India. One of his titles is "the one thus come" or "the one thus gone"—not fixed in any way, but just the openness that came and disappeared. It's a shift to vastness and presence.

Now this sounds kind of philosophical as I'm talking about it, but I want it to be practical and real, because it's a profound invitation to you, to me. Let's do a little meditation practice for twenty seconds that I've done before with you. And here's the instruction: when I say start, I want you to stop or cease being aware. When I say begin, do whatever you can to not be aware. Scrunch your eyes, hold your ears—do whatever you need.

All right. Are you ready? Don't be aware. Begin.

Of course, it becomes clear you can't do it. Because who you are is awareness itself. You are consciousness. You are this loving awareness that was born into this body, that is the witness of emotions that come and go and thoughts, that puts on the roles and

identifies with your body in all its phases—when it's a tiny infant and a little child and a middle-aged athlete and an older person. Who you are, my teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows," the knowing itself.

There's a text, a story of someone coming to see the Buddha and asking him a profound question. He says, "You are a Buddha, is that correct?" And the Buddha answers, "Yes, an awakened one." He says, "How can I practice so that I will not be seen by the king of death?" This is a profound question. How do I live so that I will not be subject to death? And the Buddha responds: for one who is not identified with his body and heart and mind—with the physical body, the emotions, the thoughts, perceptions that make up this life—for one who does not take this to be themselves, such a one will not be seen by the king of death.

And in this last week or two, I've tended virtually to a couple of dear ones who were dying, passing away. And in doing so—they were people who I was very close to—I had the privilege of the last whispered-in-the-ears instructions, even as they lay in a coma in some cases. But you know, people in coma can hear and remember. I've seen it so many times as people wake up and remember what happened. And I would say, let go. Let go into the clear light, into the ocean of love, loving awareness that is who you really are.

You are returning to the source. You've had this incarnation with its blessings, its difficulties. You've completed this and now it's time to let your heart be at peace and let go into the clear, pure light, the ocean of love. To know that who you are is undying, loving awareness itself.

You don't have to wait till you die, because the reality is that we are born every day. Every day at breakfast, you have a new incarnation, every moment. And to see that consciousness, to see the spirit—we'll use that word—that has taken birth in each being is an extraordinary thing.

Thomas Merton again writes so exquisitely about this, coming out of his monastery and walking down the street in the middle of town. He said, all of a sudden, it wasn't the monastery where I was looking for holiness. But in this moment, I could see the secret beauty behind the eyes of everyone walking by. That place of consciousness and love, the child of the spirit that was born into each one of them. They were shining like the stars for me.

What else is there to see but this? To see the beauty behind the eyes. To know that we get to have this human incarnation and its great dance. Who are we really? Who are you? The one listening, the one who knows. When we see in this way, there's an original innocence.

As I've talked about in India, sometimes the description is this: you go to see a great master, whoever she or he might be. And they look at you, and there you are with all your complexity and your pleasures and pains, your longings and hopes, your fears, your shame and desire and greed, your love and creativity and vision. And they look so deeply at you with what is called the glance of mercy, with a love that sees underneath all those layers and roles, looking right into your heart, into that consciousness that you really are, with great love, loving it all. Not caste or race or creed or birth or accomplishments or lack of accomplishments.

"Oh nobly born," the Buddha reminds us—you, me. Oh you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your original dignity and beauty.

I love the poem from William Stafford, where he writes of someone, the one line I always mention, where he writes of a person who felt lost in the rain and then remembered: Maybe I'm a king. Maybe I'm a queen. You are, oh nobly born. Remember who you really are.

Now this week is the celebration of Vesak—Vesakapuja it's called. In the Theravada tradition from which our mindfulness training comes, from Burma and Sri Lanka and Thailand and Laos and Cambodia, it celebrates the birth, the enlightenment, and the death of the Buddha all on the same day. A very tidy way to live a life, to be born and die enlightened on the same day.

I've always been curious why it would be celebrated this way. And I believe it's celebrated this way because we're always being born and always dying—each day, each moment. We're reborn anew in this mysterious, timeless human life. We take birth, take a new identity for a time, and then it passes away. And so our birth and death and our freedom or enlightenment are here, just where we are. As they were for the Buddha, as he walked across India in the state of freedom and nirvana.

Okay, beautiful poetry. But how does this really help? We've just gone through tax season. We still have to wear a mask some of the time, or we don't know who's vaccinated and who's not—should we wear a mask? We have teenagers in our family who are struggling more than teenagers usually did through the pandemic. We invested in cryptocurrency and it just tanked for the week. Our marriage has gotten a little bit

stale, or we feel estranged from a friend. We feel guilty because we're not doing enough for the people with COVID in India or Brazil, enough for those most hard hit by the pandemic. We have all these things that weigh on our hearts and that we have to deal with.

How do we do it?

I remember this Peanuts cartoon. There's Charlie Brown lying in his bed saying, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and ask, where have I gone wrong?" And then a voice says to him, "This is going to take more than one night." You know, that great humor of Charles Schultz.

So here's the story. There was an ardent young monk who practiced day and night in order to get enlightened. He struggled and struggled and nothing happened. And finally he decided, I just have to get out of the monastery.

And he'd heard there was some wise old hermit at the top of the mountains. So he began to walk the trails that went way into the mountains. And there, partway up, he saw an old wise woman walking down the path, carrying a great bundle. He realized she was the one he'd heard about, this sage.

He asked her, "I've been struggling and searching for enlightenment. Do you know anything of this?"

She gazed at him with great tender eyes and dropped her bundle on the ground. Just let it go. Whatever you want. Whoever you are. Whatever you imagine. Just let go and be.

And in his case, it was the right moment. He realized what we all can learn—that he could let it go. Not try to be something. Not even look for enlightenment. But just to be.

Then he looked at her and said, "So now what?"

She reached down, picked up the bundle, and continued to walk down toward town. The paintings that are done of this wise sage in different forms show her entering the marketplace with what are called bliss-bestowing hands, going into the shops and speaking with people and being part of the community. All that she does, all that she touches, is with a free and loving heart.

So yes, we are this loving awareness itself. And yes, we have this human life. Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master, puts it this way: "You're perfect just as you are, and there's still room for improvement." One of those brilliant statements by a wise Zen master.

From the place of the one who knows, you become the witness to it all. You remember vastness. Like the woman I worked with who had to go home to her family in Illinois, to the old family home, because her father had Alzheimer's and her mother, who was taking care of him, had fallen and broken her hip. The house was a wreck when she got there, and she realized they couldn't live there anymore. She had to move them out—all those struggles. She began to weep for her parents and the loss. It was her childhood home.

Then she walked out into the hills near her family home and got to the hilltop. In the daytime she could see her house and the neighborhood and the farmland stretched around and the cumulus clouds in the sky and the vastness of that Midwestern landscape. She became quiet and tender inside.

As she breathed, she realized she wasn't the only one whose parents were aging. She wasn't the only one whose life was in change. She could feel that she was part of thousands of others who loved and cared for their parents even as they aged, even as they needed new levels of help, even as they had to let go—all of them together—of the way that it was, to make room for the next moment and the next thing.

She realized, "Ah, I'm not alone in this. This is the human incarnation. This is human life itself, with its joys and its sorrows and its seasons." She could see with the eyes of wisdom, the one who knows.

So you see in this way, and then you go back and mop the floor. You tend the people around you with care and a loving heart. You do it beautifully. We learned this in the monastery—that you took care with your bowl and your robes and all the things that were given to you, and you swept the path beautifully. Not in order to have a clean path, but to express the care and love that you had learned, even as you became vast in your consciousness, in your heart. The goal being to be where you are with inner freedom and love.

And then again, as William Blake said, "If one is to do good, it must be done in the minute particulars. General good is the plea of the hypocrite, the flatterer, and the scoundrel."

So you know who you are underneath it all—under all those robes and roles and thoughts and feelings. You become the one who knows.

And then you enter with caring and bliss-bestowing hands.

As we get toward the end of this talk—though there's still a bit of a ways to go—I want to speak about a book I've been reading called *Novice to Master*, the story of Soko Morinaga, who became a great Zen master and died in the 1990s. He trained in the Rinzai Zen tradition.

After World War II, his parents died not long after the war's end, and the whole society was in tremendous upheaval. He didn't know what to do. So he decided to enter a Zen monastery to understand himself and the world.

He went to work in the garden of the monastery because after he bowed and was received, Master Zuigan said, "You're here, you need to help." Morinaga asked, "What can I do?" And Zuigan said, "Clean the garden."

So he raked all the leaves—there were many fallen leaves from a storm that had passed. He raked them into a big pile and tended the paths, and he was rather proud of himself because it looked so good. He called the Roshi and asked, "Where should I put this trash?"—referring to the pile of leaves and twigs he'd gathered.

The Roshi shouted at him, which is part of that Rinzai tradition: "There is no trash! There is no trash!" Then the Roshi looked at him and said, "You don't believe me. Here's what I want you to do. Go and get a big sack and take all the leaves out of this pile because we'll use them to make a fire under the hot bath that the monks use."

So he brought the bag and removed all the leaves. But underneath remained a big pile of stones and clods of earth. He thought, surely this is useless. And the master said, "Now, sort out and pick out all the stones, because with the great rains coming down the rain spouts from the building, the stones have been dislodged." With a whole basket of stones, he was directed to place them back and repair where they'd been dislodged until everything was perfectly smooth and the rainwater could flow easily.

He went back and saw the master, then picked up all the sand and clods of dirt in another basket. He walked along the path looking for small depressions and dips where at night, if one wasn't careful, one might fall or misstep. He placed them carefully, one after another.

When it was done and nothing remained of the pile, the master paused with him and said, "From the first, in people and in things, there's no such thing as trash."

What a teaching. What a beautiful teaching. In people and in things, there's no such thing as trash. There's just this world that we have to tend in our way.

The story of Morinaga Roshi is primarily one of very hard training—poor food, little sleep, a tremendous amount of surrender over years—until gradually, with all his self-doubt and insecurity and grief and stupidity, he learned to accept himself and feel confident in his true self. The subtitle of the book is "An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity." So it's not just my word, but his.

At the end of the book, at the end of his Zen journey and story, he speaks of an older woman named Miss Okamoto. When she was forty years old, she'd come to the monastery wanting to serve in whatever way she could. Yes, she would meditate, sit with a koan, but she took it upon herself to wash the robes of the master and the senior monks. She took it upon herself to plant and tend the garden beds, to pickle the vegetables, to cook. She was incredibly devoted to the monastery. Her practice was working from morning to night, serving in a very dedicated and full way.

She lived a strict and upright life such that when the young novices were sent to talk to Miss Okamoto, they were a little scared of her because she was so intent and serious.

Then in her seventies, she called to the Zen master. By then Zuigan had died and Morinaga had become the master of the temple. She said, "You know, I've asked very little of you. But I'm terrified because I was told I have metastatic cancer. I'm grateful for these teachings, but I realize I must have failed because I'm really afraid. I'm afraid of dying. How have I gone wrong? How have I gone wrong?"

And now I will read you some excerpts from Morinaga's description of his work with her. It's more than I usually read in a talk, but there's something so compelling about it that I hope it will be for you as well.

"Although Miss Okamoto, who beseeched me, was twenty-four years my elder, her earnest confession prompted me to bluntly call her attention to something that had been weighing on my mind about her. This woman had led a flawless, commendable life, but she had always stoically gritted her teeth in an effort to do good and avoid evil. Sharply distinguishing between good and bad, forever sizing up and passing judgment on every situation, she went about her endeavors to do better—but with her teeth clenched fast.

"I explained to Miss Okamoto: You come from your mother's womb and leave in your coffin. The time in between you call life. And perhaps you think going into your coffin is death, but true existence is birth and death all the time. Our lives appear to be unbroken blocks, but if you look at a candle flame, which seems to burn continuously, actually the wax is burning down bit by bit, and the wick that blazes is passing as the

flame moves down. When you understand this, you realize that you are a wife, a husband, a spouse, a neighbor next door. You have these roles, and you notice that you are born again and again. You die in each instant and get born again.

"I told Miss Okamoto: When you go to the kitchen to prepare dinner, be born in the kitchen. When you finish there, die. When you are born at the dining table, as you eat your dinner, be born, and when you finish eating, die there. When you go to bed at night, die there. And when you wake up fresh, be born anew. And if you have cancer, be born with cancer.

"I've seen many people in practice over the years. I do not know of anyone who so splendidly and thoroughly took my instructions to heart. It wasn't even ten days before her rigid countenance had softened into a baby face, into the face of a sweet old lady. She'd been given permission to leave behind the lifestyle in which she had to grit her teeth and try to live right.

"Miss Okamoto's disease grew progressively worse and she was finally hospitalized. I remember that when I called on her, the doctors and nurses all remarked that though they'd worked in the hospital for many years, they had never encountered a patient like this one. For by this time she had entered the hospital, she was greeting everyone and everything, every scene, in the spirit of one chance, one encounter.

"One chance, one encounter may occur when one encounters a stone, when one comes upon a weed, when one is cleaning the bathroom or cooking rice. It refers to the state of heart and mind in which one makes absolutely no projections of favorability or adversity, but meets life as it is.

"Not long before Miss Okamoto died, as I was tending to her, she looked up and said, 'I've led a pretty stuffy life all these years. So I think I'll just take a ball and go out and play in the woods. Play in the woods now.' These were her last words. And we, the monks of the temple, placed a beautiful ball of colored threads inside her grave."

This story really touches me because we've tried so hard. And it's not that it isn't important to practice—any good musician knows how you need to practice. But when you become a good musician and you keep practicing, you do it for the joy of it. You practice for the pleasure of it. So as Suzuki Roshi says, yes, there's room for improvement—but not as a goal, not as a judgment. Rather, out of the delight of being alive and being able to attend and develop and open to compassion, tenderness, and understanding.

You have within you this loving awareness, this loving presence, and there's no trash. Nothing that cannot be treated with dignity and respect. And then you learn that meditation and mindfulness is not passive but a way of tending the garden of the earth. You honor your true nature. You honor the birth and death and enlightenment of the Buddha within yourself, this Vesak.

I think of a woman who worked in juvenile hall. Her own mother had died when she was quite young, nine years old. Her sister was eight. Their mother died of cancer. And before she died, she sewed a beautiful little doll. One of the last things she did for her children, the two daughters, was to take the doll and cut it in half. She said, "I've given life to both of you. You were in me and I am in you. I'm always a part of you." And she put this in their hands.

So here this woman was later, one of those girls grown up, working in juvenile hall. There were girls there, young women who were depressed and suicidal, who'd been through terrible things—abused and mistreated culturally and in their families, harming themselves. On her last day working with them, she got a big piece of paper and made a big paper doll. She'd been with the girls for some months. Then she cut it into six parts and gave a part to each one of them, saying, "I've come to know you and I've come to love you, and I want you to know that I'm with you."

You can always carry this.

And a year later, she received a letter from one of those girls saying, "I went back and finished high school. I'm about to go to community college now. Yes, I felt terrible at times. I thought sometimes of the worst—of killing myself. And then I would take out the part of the doll you gave me and know you were with me."

In spite of your regrets, your own share of sorrows and struggles, you too are always held—like these girls, held by love, held by the dharma, held by the universe that you cannot fall out of. And of course, we all have times that we forget. But the one who knows in us, the loving witness, knows that what matters in the end is integrity and generosity, reaching out with care, and not holding on so tightly as things are born and die.

This is the inner Vesak—being reborn as the one who knows. And it allows you to enter this world with a free heart.

Here is one last teaching from Morinaga:

If a person is working for wages, shoveling sand onto the bed of a truck, they may get tired. Should someone happen along and offer to help them out, they will most likely be glad to hand over the shovel. But suppose a child is playing in a sand pile, scooping sand into a bucket and then pouring it back out. Should someone walk up and offer to take over for a while, the child would balk at such foolishness. "Why should I want you to take over when I'm having so much fun?"

Even the most fleeting of activities—the business of preparing a meal or cleaning the community hall or tending what is around you—can be what I call the samadhi of play, bringing your awakening alive from moment to moment.

Yes, we need to practice to remember courage and tenderness, to use those skillful means to remind us, so we can quiet our mind and tend our heart. And remember that who you are is the awakened one—herself, himself, the Blessed One. You are loving awareness, witnessing the dance of this life. And from this place of freedom, from awareness itself, you reach out and tend the garden of this world beautifully.

So take a moment just to settle with these words. It's not about improving yourself, but living with joy.

CHAPTER 118

Meditation: The Compassionate Heart

Jack Kornfield · 28 min

> *In this gentle guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through the traditional Buddhist practice of cultivating karuṇā—the compassionate heart. Beginning with settling into presence and relaxation, the meditation unfolds in expanding circles of care, starting with someone we naturally love, then turning compassion toward ourselves, extending to those who are struggling, and ultimately radiating boundless compassion to all breathing beings everywhere.*
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> *Kornfield draws on the archetypal imagery of Kuan Yin (Avalokiteśvara), the bodhisattva of infinite compassion with a thousand hands to hold all who suffer, a thousand eyes and ears to witness the world's sorrows. This practice connects to the brahmavihāra tradition of cultivating boundless heart qualities, particularly the quality of compassion that responds to suffering with the wish for its relief.*
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> *The meditation offers simple phrases as vehicles for opening the heart: "May you be held in compassion," "May your struggles and sorrows be eased," "May your heart be at peace." Kornfield emphasizes the flexibility of this practice—practitioners are encouraged to adapt the words, use silence if preferred, and most importantly, to hold even the awkwardness or difficulty of the practice itself with tenderness. This teaching reminds us that compassion meditation is not about achieving a particular state, but about repeatedly turning toward suffering with an open heart, beginning with our own.*

Good evening, dear friends. Let us begin by practicing meditation together. Tonight, the practice we will do is the traditional practice of the compassionate heart.

Let yourself settle and find a way to sit that's comfortable and at ease. Allow your eyes to close gently. Take a few deep breaths—slow, deep breaths—inhaling a long breath. As you exhale, release whatever tension you can. Let your eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the seat—your buttocks, your feet on the floor—wherever you're seated. Sense how you can rest fully on the earth, just where you are. Relax and let the earth support you. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of compassion and tenderness.

Now, in this space of presence and attention, let us begin this guided meditation with a traditional practice of compassion that uses images and words as an invitation to the heart to open and to hold all with a deep sense of compassion. Find your way with this meditation, whatever ways work best for you. You can alter or change it as you need as we go along.

In this space of presence, let yourself first remember, think of, picture someone that you care about—someone that you love, where it's easy and natural and not too conflicted. As you bring them into the mind's eye and into the heart, feel the natural well-wishing of love, the care that you have for them, how you care about them.

As you think of and picture and imagine and sense this human being, this one you care about, feeling that care, let yourself also become aware of the measure of difficulty, the struggles in this person's life, as in all lives—the kinds of pains they've carried, the suffering that they've been through as all human beings endure, the struggles.

As you open to their struggles and difficulties, their pain, begin to surround them with a tender compassion and offer these simple phrases of well-wishing and care: *May you be held in compassion, a tender compassion.* Feel that you could almost wrap them with your care and kindness for all that's difficult. *May your struggles and sorrows be eased. May your heart be at peace.*

Feel how much and how natural it is to wish this tender compassion for one you care about. *May you be held in great compassion. May you hold yourself in compassion and tenderness. May your sorrows and pains and struggles be eased. May your heart be at peace.* Surround them with the warmth, the warm light and field of compassion.

Now this one you care about gazes back at you. As you look into their eyes, they look at you and they see that you too have a measure of struggles and pain. They see that you too carry your sorrows. And they wish the same for you. They gaze at you so kindly, and this loved one, this one you care about, says: *May you too hold yourself in tenderness and compassion. May your sorrows and struggles and pains be eased. May your heart be at peace.*

As you receive their wishes of compassion, perhaps put a hand on your heart, taking it in. *May I hold myself, my struggles and difficulties, with compassion and kindness. May my sorrows and struggles and pains be eased. May my heart be at peace.* Feel that this is possible within you—a tender compassion, an easing of struggles, a more and more peaceful heart.

Now you become a beacon, a lamp of compassion. Let yourself think of someone else you know who is struggling in difficulty, and from this field of care and compassion...

Picture them, be aware of their struggles and pains—this human being, all of them—and wrapping them with the light or energy of tenderness and compassion, wish, offer:

May you hold yourself in great compassion.
May your pains and sorrows and struggles be eased.
May your heart be at peace.

And again, gently, in whatever words speak from your heart, words like:

May you hold yourself in tender compassion—and feel it.
May your sorrows and struggles be eased.
May your heart be at peace.

Sense how you are now seated in the field of compassion, and you can radiate this care and loving compassion out in a circle to include first all those close to you, wishing all your friends and family and dear ones—so many, each with their own struggles—as if you could gather them in your arms and hold them.

May you all hold yourself in the great tender compassion of heart.
May your sorrows and struggles be eased.
May your hearts be at peace.

As you extend the field of compassion, feel how your own body is breathing. And all of their bodies are breathing. Breathing beings on this earth.

Now let the circle of compassion, the field of the great heart of compassion, extend itself in every direction to human beings everywhere and to breathing beings, human and non-human—animals, every kind of being breathing on this earth, breathing with you. Those who are being born and those who are dying, so many. Those who are struggling to feed or care for their children or their parents. Those who are struggling for dignity and justice.

Let yourself sense or feel now that you sit like Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, with a thousand hands to hold the hands of all who are struggling, a thousand arms to support, a thousand eyes and ears to hear the cries and the longing.

You become Kuan Yin, Mother Mary. You become the grandmothers, the generation of great-grandmothers, the indigenous grandmothers who've seen it all.

As if you could float above the earth now and gaze at this blue-green ball floating in the vast space of our galaxy. And with a heart of compassion, the wisdom of Solomon, the Buddha, you spread your compassion and tenderness across this magnificent and troubled world.

All breathing beings, may you all be held in compassion and tenderness, every one.
All breathing beings, may your sorrows and struggles and pains be eased.
All beings in every form, may you feel this well-wishing of compassion.
May it touch you, radiating out from your heart.
May you all find a way for your hearts to be at peace.

Now you sit quietly as the bodhisattva of compassion. Take a few more minutes quietly to radiate this loving compassion and care, or to surround whoever arises in the heart and mind and make sure that they are included.

Finally, feel your breathing and sense how you're breathing together with myriad other beings—millions and billions breathing, all tender beings. And how, as you breathe together with them, wherever they are, you can share the great heart of compassion.

May their struggles be eased.
And may they and all beings be at peace.

When you're ready, let your eyes open gently. Keeping the spirit of compassion, tenderness for yourself especially.

Know that this is a form of meditation that you can alter or change as you need. You can change the phrases so they speak from your heart. You can do it silently, without words at all. And if it feels difficult or awkward or mechanical, have compassion for that too. Tenderness and compassion for how hard it is, for the awkwardness of it, the fears that it brings up. Hold it all with compassion.

CHAPTER 119

Q&A: The Compassionate Heart

Jack Kornfield · 14 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Jack Kornfield addresses profound questions about death, caregiving, and the wisdom of meeting people exactly where they are. When a student asks how to comfort a dear friend dying of cancer who desperately wants to live, Kornfield shares a powerful story of a Burmese master who surprised everyone by encouraging a terminally ill woman to fight for life rather than teaching her to let go—and she lived two and a half more years.*
>
> *The conversation deepens as a healthcare worker shares her own transformation while caring for an elderly patient with metastatic cancer. She describes how her judgment about the patient's choices dissolved into acceptance and presence, embodying the teaching that we must honor others' wishes even when we might choose differently. Kornfield affirms that such caregiving is itself a profound spiritual practice.*
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> *The talk concludes with reflections on maintaining joy and embodied awareness in daily life, drawing on the themes of Vesākha (the celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death). Kornfield emphasizes that spiritual practice isn't about grim duty but about letting our love and wisdom shine—trusting ourselves, paying attention with kindness, and nurturing what is beautiful in each moment.*

And now I would welcome a few questions.

Linda, go ahead with your question.

"I hear everything you said this evening. I have a good friend who's not a Buddhist, who's not a meditator. She's only 63, and she's dying from stage four colon cancer that's metastasized. She wants desperately to live on. I'm wondering what, if anything, I could offer her. She's been a teacher for 25 years, tending to other people's children—the children she never had herself. And she wants so desperately to live. I couldn't go in and say to her, just let it go and walk into the clear light. I don't know what to say to her. What would you say to someone who wasn't coming from the same philosophical understanding that might offer words of comfort, letting her know that with a heart of great compassion, you care about her?"

This is such an important question. And it points to something really beautiful: you already know the answer within your question. This isn't the time to tell her to let go. Remember that common saw that says timing is everything?

I remember a woman who had metastatic brain cancer and was doing all kinds of things to heal herself. It had gotten worse. She did ninety days of a carrot juice fast. She went to see the experts on dying and healing. She did every possible thing, and she was just getting worse. Then she came to a retreat with a great old master who was visiting us from Burma. She went to see him, and I thought he would give her the end-of-life instructions to go into the light.

He listened to her as your friend spoke. And he said, "What is it that matters to you?" She said, "I want to live." And he said, "Great. Here's a practice of sending love into your brain through compassion and loving-kindness. Here's a special herbal remedy that I know from the jungles of Burma. Here are some teachings for you. Let me hold your hand and feel the courage that I impart to you. Do everything you can to stay alive."

I was really surprised when he said that. It turned out she lived two and a half years longer. They had told her she had a month to go. No one knows when it is time for someone to die. Then, when it was time, her head turned from this life to the next.

Your question, which is such a deep one, has in it your own intelligence and wisdom. That's not what she needs to hear now. She needs to have you hold her hand if you're with her in person and love her. Say to her, "You have a great, courageous spirit. Do all you can. How can I help you to stay alive as long as you can and make your days as full and beautiful as you can?"

Only when it's time—maybe at the very end, if you have the privilege of being with her and the privilege of being asked—then at that moment, you might say to her as a dear one, "Now it's time, and you can let go into the ocean of love that is who you really are."

I love that you already know this, and that you can trust that in yourself.

Thank you, Linda.

Padma, you can unmute and ask your question.

I just want to say hello, Jack. I wanted to share that this teaching is coming to me in the moment when I need it. More than asking a question, I wanted to make an observation.

Please.

I was taking care of a seventy-four-year-old today. Part of the care was to give her blood. She had metastatic cancer. And I was seeing myself—there was so much agitation in me from before we went into the procedure, before she was having surgery. I had this judgment in my heart that I wished she chose to let go. Why is she having this surgery? Why is she doing all this? And it's not in my hands, and I am part of her care.

At some point, right in the middle of the second unit of transfusion, I simply let go. And I said, you know what? This is what she wants. She already clearly said she was not ready to go. I need to do everything to just offer the prayer to let her get through this and come out to whatever it is that she's looking for.

And to hear all this—between you and Linda, this conversation—it's just really overwhelming for me. I just wanted to acknowledge that. It is amazing to me how, if we open our heart, we can stop the judgment and then be with the person for whatever they want in life, however they want it. We may not see it. We may not understand it. We may choose differently. But those we love, those we care for—this is what they want. This is who they are.

There were many times in my past when I didn't understand that. I gave my loved ones such a hard time about the choices they were making, because I knew what the right choice was. And I really am very grateful to you for bringing that up. And thank you, Linda. That's all.

Thank you so much. Thank you also for all the care that you give and tend to people. It's not an easy thing. It asks a kind of profound spiritual practice to be able to be present as you describe, and just the wisdom that you offer. I don't want to say any more. It's gorgeous. Thank you.

Thank you.

Louisa, you can unmute and ask your question.

Hello.

Hello, Jack. Hello, everyone.

Hi, Louisa.

I'm just coming out of a week-long retreat, and joy came up so much. In the end it was an online retreat. We all brought our pets and the things that we love—our Buddha statues and our plants. And I just think this talk is so amazing as far as this integration goes back to reality. It was so beautiful to give myself that week of pause and reset, just

this looking for joy as embodied awareness and attention to every moment, trying to find the joy in everything. So I just wanted to thank you for this beautiful talk and synchronicity, and for fitting right into my week-long teachings.

It's beautiful. Can you share any more of what was most important for you that you learned in that retreat, or that touched you?

It was a lot about openness and letting go. It was a Mahasati retreat—my first time trying that practice. It's definitely quite heady in some ways, but it's really about letting go at the same time. There were many embodied practices as well, a lot of nervous system regulation. I think this is especially important in a year where we've been so taxed with our own trauma and the collective trauma. It's really essential to be able to bring our nervous systems down and embody ourselves in a grounded way. So that was another significant aspect. It was interesting to dip my toes into the Mahasati approach—pretty interesting stuff, for sure.

One last thing: let your eyes close just for a moment. Feel the joy and the understanding, the embodied wisdom and joy that you carry from this retreat. Let yourself sense and imagine that you can bring this alive, that you can carry this for days and weeks and months, that it can be how you are and how you live. It's not the retreat. No, it's you, Luisa. How does that feel?

It feels amazing right now. I definitely feel like I'm loving awareness right now.

Beautiful. Thank you.

Hopefully I can keep it up, but I'll keep practicing.

Well, you know, it doesn't actually take very much. Sometimes just five minutes of pausing and sitting and saying, "Oh yeah, let me tune in again. Let me remember. I had a busy morning." Because it's right there. And it is who you are.

Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Take a breath, everyone. Perhaps this is the end of questions and dialogue for the evening, which is just fine. Things have their own rhythm.

I'm glad I got to share these stories with you. You know I'm a storyteller—it makes me happy to tell a good story. And then to read a story like Morinaga's, even though that's more than I would normally read, I was so captivated by the tale of him saying there is no such thing as trash, that no one should be discarded, that nothing should be

discarded, but all honored. And then to tell the story of Ms. Okamoto and what it means to shift from a spiritual life of grim duty to one of play and joy, of bringing loving awareness wherever we are.

So dear ones, this is the message of Vesak, of the birth and death and enlightenment—the gift of your own life, what you can live. Trust yourself. Pay attention in a kind way. Nurture what's beautiful. Practice not to get something or gain something, but to let your love and wisdom shine.

Thank you. Good night.

CHAPTER 120

Summer Solstice | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 55 min

> *In this heartfelt talk delivered during the week of the summer solstice, Jack Kornfield weaves together poetry, story, and contemplative wisdom to explore the great turning of seasons—both outer and inner. He begins by acknowledging the tensions of our time: climate change, social injustice, political upheaval, and the question of whether we are headed into darkness or light. Yet he guides us beyond the trap of optimism versus pessimism, pointing to something deeper: mystery itself.*
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> *Drawing on the famous Zen kōan of Seijō, whose soul separated from her body when she was forced to abandon her true love, Kornfield explores the universal experience of exile—how we become disconnected from our bodies, hearts, and the present moment through shame, anxiety, ambition, or spiritual bypassing. He shares the poem "I Am Not I" by Juan Ramón Jiménez and teachings on how mindful loving awareness can end this exile, bringing us home to the luminosity of our true nature.*
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> *The talk becomes a guided exploration of illumination at three levels: body, heart, and mind. Kornfield invites listeners to tend their bodies with gratitude, to discover what the heart needs to let go of and hold with more love, and to witness the mind's garden with wise attention. He concludes with the Zen image of the sage picking up her bundle and walking back into the village with "bliss-bestowing hands"—reminding us that awakening calls us not to withdraw but to carry our lamp into the world, planting seeds of healing and care for all beings.*

So welcome back, my friends. Let yourself relax and listen, not so much to try to remember or take notes—no quiz from this teaching—but rather let it be a reminder to you of something that you already know.

Here we are, the week of the summer solstice, the longest day of the year in the Northern hemisphere. I'm down in Los Angeles staying with Trudy in her place, even though we also live up towards Spirit Rock and Marin part of the year. And everything is blooming. These huge walls of bougainvillea and people's rose gardens—I turn everywhere and there's blossoms, like the sunlight is having its way with the green things and the flowers that want to grow.

And of course, the sun, the center of our solar system, the light that we all live upon—it's something for us to pay attention to, something we take for granted. Ruth Denison, one of our wonderful and great teachers, now an ancestor, was leading a retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Barre in the early years, and she was going through the refuges: to take refuge in Buddha and Dharma and Sangha. Ruth had her own accent, having been born and raised in Germany. And a woman from the South came up and said, "I understand taking refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma, but would you explain why we're taking refuge in the sun god?" And Ruth said, "Ah, the sun god, yes. Sangha, sun god."

But in fact, the sun is the source of so much. It's what we live from. One of the best and most beautiful reflections I have is that every single leaf that I see—the trillions or quadrillions or quintillions of them—has this magic capacity to turn light into sugar to feed us all. What an extraordinary thing. And it all comes from the source of the most primordial light.

Here we are in the change of seasons, which is the great turning. I remember friends who went to see a full eclipse of the sun in Africa. They were up in the mountains, I think in Kenya, looking out across this vast plain. As they looked across the vast plain, this huge edge of a circle, which was actually the shadow of the moon, started racing across the plain and moving toward them until it reached them and they were in the total darkness of the full eclipse. They said it was like seeing the spheres, the music of the spheres, the dance of the spheres. You could feel the moon moving around the earth and the earth around the sun. This is what we are a part of, this great turning.

But as this season turns this week from the most light, it starts to diminish and go toward the winter and the darkness. And that's a question for us, especially in these times. Are we headed into the dark? You know Dickens' beginning: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." Should we be optimistic or pessimistic?

There are lots of reasons for pessimism, sensing that we're going into a kind of darkness. Climate change, habitat loss, the pandemic, continuing warfare, economic injustice, the scourge of racism. Plato said, "Only the dead know the end of war." Materialism, the loss of democratic values, fake news—where, as it's said, a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes. This is samsara. This is part of the deal of a human incarnation. One British reporter's view, looking at the US from England, said, "I hope you Americans learn how to end an empire gracefully"—because that's also what's happening. So we can see in some way through that lens of things getting worse: democracy under threat, the planet.

But there is also cause for optimism, amazing possibilities: the re-enchantment of the world, movements for social justice and racial justice, the science of fusion reactors that will have no terrible byproducts, the possibility that the interdependence revealed by the pandemic and climate change might bring a collaborative model to show us our interconnection. All of this is possible for us at this time.

And so many acts of goodness. Little acts of goodness. "I see the goodness on my husband's face when he sees the kids after an out-of-town trip. Or when my youngest son hears the fatigue in my voice and brings me a cup of water. I see it in my wife when she greets the parking attendant or the cashier with such kindness and attention and respect. I see it in my five-year-old daughter who says to the sun at sunset, 'Goodbye, sun, I love you.' When my husband pulls over to help someone whose car has died and never asks anything for his time."

So many acts of goodness. Mark Morford says, "Stop thinking our global crisis is all there is. Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation and fake news, there's a thousand counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty happening all over the world right now on a breathtaking scale, from flower box to cathedral. Resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, in pessimism, to shake your head and sigh and throw in the karmic towel."

Realize that this is the perfect moment for enthusiasm, for the re-enchantment of the world—to change the energy, to step right up and crank your personal volume right when it all seems dark or bitter or offensive, acrimonious, conflicted, bilious. There's your opening. Remember the mystery and finally believe in the seeds that you plant as part of a groundswell, a karmic impending shift, small but amazing, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable.

So which is it, dear ones? Pessimism, decline, chaos? Or optimism, potential, new ways, synergy?

If you stop and get quiet, you begin to realize that optimism and pessimism are just ideas. They're only thoughts. The average person, it's said, has sixty-seven thousand thoughts a day. How do we even know which ones to believe? Hope, one said, is almost as great a deceiver as despair. Because thoughts are like empty clouds. They appear and disappear, and they only have the power we give them.

So breathe for a moment with me quietly, and step out of the thrall of thoughts and just listen deeper. For the opposite of optimism or pessimism—it's not realism. It's mystery.

Remember the story of the poet Lord Byron. He was taking an exam at Oxford University, a class on theology and the Bible that one had to study back in those days, in the 1800s. For the whole hour and a half, the proctor walked back and forth and saw Lord Byron sitting quietly, not writing anything in his notebook while everyone else scrawled away at the question. The question was: write an essay about the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine. Byron sat and sat until finally the time was about to end and the proctor came by and said, "Have you finished? You only have a couple more minutes. You've written nothing." Byron smiled, got quiet, and wrote one line: "The water met its master and blushed."

He got an A. He got an A because he listened so beautifully to that mystery—what Mary Oliver calls being a bride married to amazement.

When we get quiet, we can feel ourselves in the turning of the spheres. And the way that the world works—when you go on a very long retreat, a year or three years, the retreat master will say, "While you're on retreat, many people will be born and many will die. And your task is to sit and open your heart to it all." If we have birth, we have to have death. That's how it works. If there's birth, there is death. If there's gain, there's loss. If there's joy, there's also sorrow. The world is constructed this way. If our earth didn't spin on its axis and turn the way it does, if it were still, one side would be freezing and the other side would be baking and boiling. But the truth is that all things turn. And we are part of these great turnings of birth and death and gain and loss and pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow.

Remember the Ojibwa saying: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

And so on the solstice, we can quiet ourselves and feel this great turning, the timelessness of it. Mindfulness—it's a kind of prosaic word. I like to use the phrase mindful loving awareness. It is an invitation to see with the eyes of wonder.

I was recently asked and invited to give last words to a dear friend who was dying. While I couldn't visit in person, as I have in many cases with people that I'm close to, I was able to say, "Can you put the phone up to her ears?" "Oh, nobly born," I began, as if in the text of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. "Now is the time to let go. Now is the time you are leaving this body. You are dying. It has come to this time. Listen carefully. Let go into the light, into the ocean of light and love that is who you really are—the pure, clear light that is your true nature. Trust it. Relax into it. It is your home."

And it felt so moving to be able to join with this loved one in this mystery. This is to see with eyes of wonder and to remember that who we are underneath it all is a light.

It's the light that Thomas Merton saw walking down the streets of Louisville, Kentucky, shining out of everyone's eyes. He asked, "What was I doing in the monastery when I could see the luminosity behind the eyes of every human being going by?"

But of course the question is, how can we see in this way?

I love this poem that I've read for years and years, by Barbara Ruth. She writes:

I'm a country girl again in a middle-aged disabled body. I once walked the six miles from my house to Kent Lake in four hours, but that wasn't my best time. My personal best is eight hours and fifteen minutes. That includes time resting with lizards sunning on the rock, writing down a dream remembered, staring at Mount Barnaby, listening to woodpecker in the tree that harbors osprey's nest.

This is how.

Thomas Merton goes on: "Of what avail is it to travel to the moon if we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves and from one another?" And without this loving awareness, we're in exile from the natural world, from our own bodies, from the sacredness of the earth.

A couple of years ago, I told a story that's quite famous in Zen—the story of Seijo. Seijo was a young girl whose mother died shortly after she was born. Then sometime later, her older sister died. In those days, without antibiotics and other medicines, the death of children was more frequent than here. And so she became the anchor for her father, Chokhan. "At least I have this beautiful daughter still."

Seijo played often with a cousin of hers, a neighbor, a distant cousin named Ochu. And because they got along so well, people would joke and say, "Oh, you're such a sweet young couple, you little ones. You'll make a good marriage when you grow up." And so they believed it. They played and believed they were married in some way in their hearts. And over the course of time, their love deepened.

Now it happened that Seijo was also quite beautiful. She grew into this winsome and lovely woman, and she had many suitors. Finally, when she came to marriage age, her father announced to her—which was the way of arranged marriages in that time—that he'd agreed to have her married to a young man from a very prosperous family, and that the marriage would take place in just a month.

She was shocked. She wept. She was depressed, cast down. She thought she was marrying Ochu. That was the love of her heart. She was so brokenhearted, as was he. He was so brokenhearted he could barely breathe. And he decided to run away. He couldn't

be around what was happening. So he took his boat, put some possessions in it, bid goodbye to his parents, and began to go downstream on the river that flowed by the village where they lived.

Seijo, hearing that he was doing so, that night gathered a few things in a knapsack and ran along the side of the river calling out his name—"Ochu! Ochu!"—until he pulled the boat over and said, "Get in."

And they went down the river together and found a village some far distance away and began to work and build a life together. They got married. They had two beautiful children. They lived together.

But after five years, regret over leaving her old father and longing for their home grew stronger and stronger. She said, "We have to go back."

So they got back in a boat and went upstream. Finally they arrived at the dock near her father's house. Ochu got out and went toward the house and met the father, Chokhan. He began to apologize. "We're here, we've come back to apologize for leaving you. We're so sorry." He bowed deeply.

And the father grew angry and stunned. He said, "What are you talking about? What are you talking about? Seijo never left. Seijo is here in bed. She's lain in bed without saying a word for five years, and I've lived with her—not quite alive and not quite dead—lying in bed, unable to speak."

And the young man Ochu said, "No. She's here with me in the boat."

We have grandchildren for you to see.

And the father sent a servant out who came back and said, yes, she's there. And the father's eyes got wide, and Seijo came out of the boat and walked toward her home. And at the same time, the Seijo who was in the bed stood up and walked out of the door.

This is a mysterious story.

And the two of them came together and entered one body. And Seijo's spirit or soul that had left her body became reunited again. And her father wept with joy and freedom.

So this is a famous koan, a famous story. And it has many levels. Who are we really? Are we our body? Are we that soul that goes elsewhere, that spirit? Who is Seijo? When we're brokenhearted, when we go through a grave illness, when all these things separate us from ourselves, who are we?

Remember the poem that I read so often, it's almost like a Buddhist text, from Juan Ramón Jiménez called "I Am Not I" — Yo no soy yo:

I am not I.
I'm this one walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget.
The one who remains silent when I talk.
The one who forgives sweet when I hate.
The one who takes a walk when I'm indoors.
The one who will remain standing when I die.

And this poem itself speaks of how we split off. How do you do it? There you are indoors, but somewhere else your heart is in the mountains or by the ocean. How many ways we've split off. We walk down the street on automatic pilot. We eat not paying attention to the mystery of the food coming into our body. We come home and we don't see the eyes and the spirit of the people we live with. And I make it a practice when I come back to look at Trudy and try to see her anew each time in some special way.

But we get carried away with our busyness. You do. Or we have in us shame or guilt, ambition, depression — these default networks that we get lost in. Even in our spiritual life, we lose ourselves, just as we can lose ourselves in shame or anxiety or guilt. Spiritual life can become a grim duty. We're trying to perfect ourselves and make ourselves better, improve ourselves. Or it becomes a bypass — let me go to the light and not really deal with all that's broken in my heart.

So like Seijo, we all have our exile. You do and I do. And often we don't even know the extent of it, of our exile, how lost we are, until we stop, until the tears come.

My daughter Caroline sometimes critiques what I do, as a good child should do with their parents. She said, "Dad, you tell so many stories. You know, you tell these heartbreaking stories." But then I look at her — she runs this beautiful nonprofit called Oasis Legal Services. She and this group of hotshot young lawyers have built what's now become one of the chief places for LGBTQ people whose lives are in danger from around the world to seek asylum. And she sits and she hears their stories, which they may never have told to anyone. She listens, because they need those stories when they go into an asylum interview. And people will tell her the ways they've been abused or tormented or raped or mistreated in Uganda or El Salvador or wherever it happens to be — so many places around the world. And I said to Caroline, you know, we need to hold these stories in our heart too.

The Buddha, when teaching a group of people, could tell how important this was, and he told a famous story about a king whose followers captured a great elephant in the forest — one of the elephant kings — and brought him into the king's palace to lead all the other elephants and the king in battle or in procession. But the elephant wouldn't move. The elephant would do nothing but stand there. And finally, the king called — I don't know what you would call it — an elephant whisperer, some man or woman who knew the heart of elephants, who could listen.

And this elephant sage came and spent time with the great elephant and said, "Oh, your majesty, this great elephant who would be proud to lead your processions cannot move because when he was captured, he'd been feeding his old, old mother who couldn't get food well in the jungle. And now she's alone and he's terribly worried."

And the king said, "Then go find this mother and bring her here, and we will treat her beautifully and give her the best of foods."

And they did so.

And the Buddha went on, this tenderness, where we love someone and care for them no matter what the distance—he said, this is what opens the heart of all those in the Dharma. And he went on: when his listeners said the Buddha shed floods of tears by reason of the softness of their heart, they became fully attentive and then awakened.

Mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, is the way to the end of exile. It's the inner quality of illumination of the path to wellbeing and freedom. And in this week of the greatest light of the summer solstice, it's a time to also let that light shine within us—to remember that who we are is awareness itself, this luminous quality of mindful loving awareness.

And as we do, we bring this mindful loving awareness to this fathom-long body, as we did in that opening meditation. Loving kindness for the body. To honor it, to offer thanks to our body for all that it carries, to tend its wounds and come home to it with love, to feel the mystery of being incarnated and how life wants to continue in you. The body wants to heal itself and continue. As Voltaire said, the art of medicine for a physician is primarily to amuse the patient while nature does the healing. Yes, an orthopedist can set the bone. Yes, a physician could apply an antibiotic to stop the bacteria. But then the body has to heal itself. And it does, day after day, again and again. It is filled with the luminosity of light, growing like spring, renewing itself in this mystery.

And when we bring mindful loving awareness to this body, it teaches us. It teaches us to trust the healing. We feel the breath, and we start to feel inter-breathing with the whole world, that we are connected in breath with all things. And all things arise and pass like the breath and change. And we find a vast stillness in the midst of it. This mindful loving awareness teaches us how to be present with love.

And this body, when we did that meditation practice and invited light—in deep meditation, when the mind becomes concentrated and focused and still, the literal experience is that the body fills with light. It dissolves into light. Because the nature of consciousness, when it's not obscured by the busyness of mind, when it's not lost in that outer way of reacting, and it becomes still and silent and present, is luminous itself. As the Tibetan Book of the Dead says, remember the pure light, the clear pure light from which everything comes, to which everything returns—your own true nature. And this is a direct experience.

And with it, as we quiet the mind and tend the heart, we learn to love with a tenderness. I try to run or jog every day, pretty much five or six days a week. But I'm turning seventy-six, so I have to wrap my knees with some strong support to do it. Still, I can do it. And I so feel the beauty of being able to move my body. And I say, thank you. Thank you to my knees for still holding out. Thank you to this body that I tend and love and care for. I shine the light of loving awareness in myself, as you just did when we sat.

Take a moment. Quiet, maybe even close your eyes. Instead of exile—what happens if you really come back to your body? What is calling to you in your body? What wants to be loved? What wants to be healed? What wants to be honored? What are the honest lessons that your body wants to teach you just now, in this season? You can know.

And feel now how your body is connected to the body of the earth. With every drink of water, with every breath and every step, you are on this earth. What is this illumination of mindful loving awareness? This end of exile? What does the earth want you to know just now?

This is one of the beautiful things of meditation. You can open your eyes if you wish. It shines a light. It opens to the light, it listens, it illuminates. And just as our body can be illuminated, so too our heart, with all its feelings.

You know, when I teach about feelings and emotions, I have this list of five hundred feelings, starting with the A's of feeling aggressive or abandoned or amused or apoplectic or animated or angry—and it goes on to the B's of bored and bunkered and belligerent and betrayed and bright—hundreds of different feelings.

The heart is an organ that can open to the ocean of feelings, but it's also an organ of light. When you pay attention, especially to those difficult feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, grief, depression—they arise because you care. You wouldn't be angry if you didn't care. You wouldn't be afraid or worried if you didn't care. And underneath that which is difficult, there is illumination and care and love and joy and connection when we pay deeper attention. The difficulties, as they say, are where the light shines through. That's where the heart cares the deepest.

We can let that light hold the whole of the heart with all of its possibilities, hold it with beauty, hold it also with lightness and ease.

Here's a story I haven't told in a long time but feel called to tell tonight—what it means to hold all that we're going through, all the feelings of the heart illuminated in the light of mindful loving awareness as they come and go.

Roberto DeVicenzo, who was the most famous Argentine golfer, kind of the equivalent of Tiger Woods, finished a tournament one day which he won. He went back to the clubhouse and smiled for the cameras, they gave him his great accolades, and then they gave him a gift. At the end, he went back to his car in the parking lot and was approached by a young woman, a charming young woman, who congratulated him on his victory and then told him that her child was seriously ill and near death, and just poured her heart out. He was so touched by her story that he took out a pen and signed over his day's winnings, the check, to her, pressed it into her hands and said, "Make some good days for the baby."

The next week, when he came back to that club and had lunch, some of the guys in the parking lot came up to him and said, "You know, last week, that woman who was here after the tournament?" DeVicenzo nodded. "Well," they said, "I have news for you. She's a phony. She doesn't have a husband, a family. She has no child. She's got no sick baby. She fleeced you, my friend."

DeVicenzo looked back and said, "You mean there's no baby who's dying?"

They said, "That's right."

And he smiled. "That's the best news I've heard all week."

Think about it. What does it mean to let the illuminated heart shine? All the things we hold on to out of our fears, the way we care, the way we repeat our stories—the frightened heart, the judgmental heart.

Close your eyes again. With the illumination, the quieting of the mind, and the illumination of awareness—what does your heart need right now? What is it time to let go of in the heart so you can be free? What is it time to illuminate and hold with more love? So many frightened hearts in the world, worried hearts like your own that we share.

Let yourself imagine that the wisest and most loving being has left a gift at your feet. The gift is a clear symbol of just what your heart needs to move through this time of the summer solstice, through this time on earth with all that we're sharing and going through, just what your heart needs to live with love and wisdom. Imagine picking up this gift and unwrapping it—the clear symbol of what the heart needs—holding it up to the sunlight. You can see. You can know.

Sometimes it's so simple. It's a crystal that has many facets and you remember, "Oh yes, there are many ways to see things." It's a staff that gives you support from the earth. Let the symbol appear. This is another way of illuminated attention listening to the wisdom of the heart.

The mind—just as we can illuminate the heart with love and attention, just as we can illuminate the body, what about the mind? So many stories, thousands of stories and opinions and views. As they say, the mind is a good servant but a poor master. It doesn't mean we have to do battle with the mind. The mind produces thoughts the way the salivary gland secretes saliva—it just does. But we can step back, quiet ourselves, and see it all with a loving heart. For the mind can put us in exile into the past and the future. But all those thoughts are like a dream.

Like Seijo and Ochu. Where we're coming back to is this amazing present moment, just where we are. The mystery of being able to see and taste and smell and touch and love.

And so you witness the mind with illuminated, mindful, loving awareness. Instead of fight or flight, it's tend and befriend. And as you do, from this perspective of illuminated attention, you can nourish what's beautiful in the mind.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the mind is like a beautiful piece of earth with many different seeds in it—seeds of joy and peace, of wellbeing and mindfulness and understanding, love. And also seeds of fear and anger and craving and hate, forgetfulness. These healthy and unhealthy qualities are there always, sleeping in the background, in the soil of the mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water. If you water

the seeds of peace, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness are watered, you will become happy. If the seeds of anger are watered, you'll become angry. The seeds that are watered are those that will grow strong.

Let the sunlight of your attention and loving awareness tend the garden of this mind and heart. Let beautiful things grow.

Who you are is this light. Who you are is loving awareness itself, is the consciousness that was born into this body, the consciousness that creates all things. You're not the body or the emotions or the thoughts—they come and go. You are the awareness that witnesses it all.

So then the question is, now what? And I love this question because I've been with grandchildren. We'll take them out to a special place to eat and get a great ice cream or see a wonderful movie. This is a common scene in Trudy's and my time with grandchildren. Something beautiful would happen and it would be over, and they'd look at us and say, "Now what?" And you may ask the same thing. Now what? What's next?

Remember the story of the monk who struggled and struggled to become enlightened. And although he got a little bit stronger and steadier, he still didn't understand. He heard that there was a great wise hermit living at the top of the mountain, so he decided to visit her one day. He made the long trek up and up the trails in the mountains. And near the top, he found an old woman coming down carrying a huge bundle, with bright eyes. He realized this was the hermit, coming down the mountain, coming back into the valley.

He looked at her and said, "Ah, you are said to be the wise one. I've been seeking enlightenment. Is there anything you know of this?" And she looked at him kindly, stared at him, steadied her eyes, and then dropped her bundle onto the ground. And he realized—oh, that's it. Just let go. She stood there plainly on the earth, carrying nothing, free. And he became illuminated. He realized this is what he needed to do: to stop even seeking to be enlightened, to be anything. Just to be.

Sounds good, doesn't it? There you are. Maybe it worked for you.

But then he asked, "Now what?" He asked that same question that the grandchildren who didn't want to be bored asked—but here he was, illuminated. He just said, "So now what?"

And she reached over and picked up the great bundle and put it on her back and continued to walk down toward the village and the town. The depictions of these in the great scrolls and teachings show the sage entering the village with what are called bliss-bestowing hands, looking upon everyone with the eyes of tenderness and loving awareness and compassion—that they too might be free.

When you see with the eyes of wisdom and compassion, you can see the light behind the eyes of everyone else, the secret beauty, the holiness of simply being alive. And it doesn't matter how dark things get and how difficult they become. Light a candle in the darkness.

And whether it's been a year or a thousand years, that light will illuminate it. Light it with your own heart.

For you become, like it says in the Tao, when your heart is at peace, you can watch the turmoil of beings and remember their return like the turning of the seasons. If you don't realize the source, the illuminated source of where we come from, the pure light of your own consciousness, you'll stumble, caught in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king, immersed in the wonder of the Tao. You can deal with whatever life brings you. And when birth and death come, you are ready for them all.

Even in the solar eclipse, when there's no light from the sun, the moon shines with earth light reflected back on it. Light finds its way into everything. The green wants to grow. The green wants to bring blessings back into this earth year by year. Your body wants to heal. In you is the innocent child of the spirit, born in inviolable beauty and light that gets covered over. But you'll see when it comes time to die that who you are is spirit and not this body. But you don't want to wait. Don't wait till that time. This is the time to carry your lamp. The last words of the Buddha: make of yourself a light.

Jasper was identified, labeled as a child with Down syndrome. In his case, his parents explained it should have been called Up syndrome. Every morning when he woke up, he rushed into his parents' bedroom and leapt onto them with enthusiasm. "Happy to you morning!" He meets the entire world with his heart outstretched and hugs everyone he can. They used to call his state retarded. Parents of similar children warned Jasper's parents to curb his hugging behavior or he could be the target of molesters. They disagreed, knowing Jasper's loving nature was his gift.

One day, Jasper and his parents were walking down the street and Jasper got out in front of them. He was almost twelve by then. An angry looking man with tattoos and piercings came toward him, and Jasper's mom thought, uh-oh, but it was too late. Jasper looked up, smiled, stepped in front of him and threw his arms around the man's legs shouting, "Hi there, hi there!" The tough guy paused and tousled Jasper's hair where Jasper was not so tall yet. And then his mom saw this innocent looking smile come over the tough guy's face. Jasper had done his magic again.

This is your time to carry the light, to make of yourself a lamp, to pretend you're enlightened. And who knows—if you pretend for a while, it could happen. And how long do you do it? As long as it takes to step out of the body of fear, to step beyond the limited sense of self, to end the exile of being lost in your fears and shame and all the things that keep you from actually loving this body, this moment, this earth.

And then you plant seeds for the earth that so needs it. You care for justice. You care for the climate. You care for one another because you become that light. You become that carrier of luminosity. You are that heart.

This is why we meditate. Yes, there's healing. Yes, there's breathing. Yes, there's vision sometimes. Yes, there are things we need to come to terms with in ourselves. Yes, there are ways of quieting ourselves and opening. In the end, it's to remember who you really are. The end of exile, the illumination. It is who you are, your true nature. You are loving awareness itself. Trust it.

You're the witness, the consciousness. You are that same light as the sun, the same source. Rest in it. It is your home.

So I hope, dear ones, that this reminds you of something, opens you, nourishes you, brings more love, sweetness, tenderness, courage, strength.

CHAPTER 121

Q and A: Summer Solstice | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 21 min

> *In this intimate Summer Solstice Q&A session, Jack Kornfield responds to practitioners' deeply personal questions about the challenges of maintaining an open heart in difficult times. The conversation touches on extending mettā (loving-kindness) to those we find challenging—even political figures who trigger us—recognizing that true diversity of heart must include everyone in our 'neighborhood,' the whole planet.*
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> *A school principal shares the weight of shame after a difficult year, and Jack offers profound reframing: shame isn't the enemy but rather a messenger pointing toward our nobility and desire to live more fully. He guides practitioners to hold both pain and pleasant experiences simultaneously, making space for the fullness of human experience. The teaching echoes Zen Master Ryōkan's humble wisdom: 'Last year a foolish monk, this year no change.'*
>
> *For a young practitioner struggling with family expectations and the seeming length of the spiritual path, Jack offers transformative guidance: the path leads not from here to there, but from there to here—back to this present moment of tenderness. He suggests the practice of creating an altar where one can place burdens in the care of compassionate figures like Kuan Yin or Mother Mary, recognizing we need not carry these weights alone. Throughout, he emphasizes the essential role of saṅgha (spiritual community) in supporting our practice and the importance of treating ourselves with the same mercy we would offer others.*

Let's take a few comments and questions before we end this evening. How was that meditation we did at the beginning?

"I am so much better after tonight. Thank you for this gorgeous evening. I came to it with something I need to share. Up to now, I've been living with this contradiction of really having a sense of the light that I am, and simultaneously, right up against that, when I get too deep in the news and get triggered by certain politicians—I won't even name them all—I'm aware that I haven't felt open-hearted toward them. I'm aware of not watering the seeds that I want to be watering in relation to them.

What this evening has shifted for me is really having a greater sense of what it means when I say the planet is my neighborhood. The planet is my neighborhood. And so I can't leave anybody out of that, even the people I frequently think of as bozos and jerks. When I say diversity, it's not just the people we ordinarily think of as being part of diversity—it now has to include people who, up to now, I could just sock. I mean, I

have very non-Buddhist thoughts about many of them. And I'm very aware that this needs to shift if I'm going to create the world I want to be creating. That came out of this evening. So thank you."

First, I'm just touched by what you say and by all the feeling behind it. I even invite you to close your eyes for a moment, because what you're expressing and the tears that come with it is how deep you care, how much it really matters, and how you want to be that beacon of love you want to be. Martin Luther King standing there saying, "We will not hate you. We'll wear you down with our capacity to love everyone." Even the bozos and jerks. Because you do need some humor. We've all had un-Buddhist thoughts. You know that's true. It's not just you, dear.

But I do metta, and I can wish anybody well. I pick the worst dictators in the world, and I wish: May you be free from fear. May you be free from ignorance. May you find love in yourself. I can wish that for anyone because, as you said better than I, this is your neighborhood. You become Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. And I just feel the goodness of your heart opening. Thank you. It's beautiful.

"Great to see you, and thank you for tonight. Last week I had chronic pain, and one of my openings and breakthroughs has been that I can feel the pain but also be aware of all these other parts of my body that are pleasant or neutral, and just make more space for all of that. That's been wonderful.

Tonight I came in feeling a deal of shame. I'm closing out a year of being an elementary school principal—what a crazy year that's been. I've been short-tempered and lashed out at too many people, and I was really wearing that. Then tonight, as we sat and as I listened to you talk, just like with the physical pain, I realized I can make space. There's a place for shame, and there's a place for so much more. Some of the gratitude and the pride and successes—all of that helped shift me."

So I thank you for that.

And I thank you for your honesty, and also for your service. You're a first responder to our children. And it's not an easy thing. I mean, I remember being sent to the principal, and I was terrified. So you have to hold all this stuff.

Our school systems are overburdened because they're supposed to be the clinics, they're supposed to offer advice to parents about how to raise their children, they're supposed to be the surrogate parents when parents are working all the time. They're tasked with so much, and often under-resourced. I don't have to tell you any of this. You want to give the children both an education and heart, and so you get discouraged at times, and then you lose it.

You might close your eyes for a moment and think of all those principals out there, all those teachers who are struggling, because it wasn't just you. Think of the thousands and hundreds of thousands of teachers who entered the profession because they care, how much they love, and how once in a while they lose it. They also feel ashamed because they want to be their best all the time. Just let a sense of tenderness and mercy come in. What a hard thing to choose to do. Feel the courage of those like you who've chosen to do it even though it's so hard, and feel the love behind it.

If you were to put it all on a scale—all the years of work and care, and some of the stupid things you did, like we all do—remember that line from Zen Master Ryokan where he wrote, "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change." When you hold all that in, sort of like the feather in the Egyptian Book of the Dead where your soul is weighed against Ma'at's feather—when you think of your years of care and what you've offered—yes, there's regret. And that regret you can say thank you for, because it's reminding you that you can be even better than you are. It's not a bad thing. The shame isn't a bad thing. It's just saying, yes, there's a nobility in you that says, "I want to live even more fully and beautifully." So it serves you.

I think all of us listening—I want to invite us all to make a kind of inner bow to the teachers and principals and those who are entrusted with our children in often really difficult circumstances, who hang in there anyway.

How does that feel to you?

Yeah.

Thanks to you and all of your cadre, this amazing cadre of dedicated educators. Take care.

Thank you so much for your teachings tonight, and all of them. I recently discovered your teachings a few months ago, and they've been a great salvation for me. I stayed up quite late on the East Coast to hear this talk tonight because today—through all your teachings, I've learned that you have to sit and sweep the garden. And lately, especially today, I find it hard to sit on the long path to liberation that's required to sweep your garden.

I wondered if you had more insights to share. My heart is needing to hear more about when you're so dismayed on certain days, how to find the patience to trust when you can't find the worth in trusting.

And I think so much about what your teacher Ajahn Chah said about the boulders in the field—they're heavy, but not if you don't pick them up. I really don't want to pick them up, but it feels very hard to let them go.

Can you tell me what some of those boulders are?

Just false narratives I've been told, or aspects of personal life—whether family or something you're so close to that perhaps doesn't always serve you. I want to sit and keep sweeping my garden, but sometimes it feels like a really long path. How does one find the worth in patience, in trusting?

A couple of things to say. It's really step by step. If you think of it as long, you can get lost and overwhelmed. But if you realize that where you're going is not there—you're not going from here to there, you're going from there to here—the path leads you back to this moment, and in this moment to a more tender heart toward yourself and those around you. When you feel that, you can pause and say, "Oh yes, I have all these expectations."

They're trying to help you. Thank you to the expectations. And where I'm going is here. Can I find some tenderness?

Now, a couple more things to say. If you have a little bit of difficulty with your family or things they say to you or their expectations—it sounds like you do, yes?

Yes.

Remember that Buddha and Jesus both had a hard time when they went back to their families. Which is to say, family is like the advanced spiritual practice. You don't want to have a lot of expectations that you're going to do it right or fix them or whatever. They are who they are. And you just have to love their quirkiness and their judgments and their being lost and all that. They gave you life. They did what they could. They still do. And you can say thank you, even though you don't have to follow everything they say. And you shouldn't. You really have to follow the wisdom of your heart. But understand that family is family, and you don't have to do anything about them or fix them. You just have to say thank you, take what's good, and love yourself.

Now, here's another thing. I'd like you to close your eyes for a moment because I can feel the dedication in you—that you really want to live with tenderness and courage and love. Can you feel that in yourself?

Yes.

I'd like you to imagine—I don't know if you have one—that you make a little altar where you live, someplace where you can put a few precious things and maybe some images of whoever inspires you. It can be Kuan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, or Mother Mary, or whoever it happens to be. And then on this altar, I want you to imagine that when things seem difficult or too hard for you, you can acknowledge them lovingly and then write them on a little piece of paper—impatience, fear, longing. You honor them kindly and then put them on the altar and say to Mother Mary or whoever is there, the Buddha, "Will you hold these with me?" So it's not just you. It's you and the illumined ones of all the ages. And it's also all the young women of the world who need their own altars, saying, "Yes, let's do this together. Let's not be under the weight of these, but let's carry them with mercy and tenderness."

Feel how, as you do that, it frees you in some way. Now you don't have to carry it alone. It's actually carried by Mother Mary, by Kuan Yin. Sense this image and tell me—does this feel like it might be useful?

It does. It feels lighter, like I'm not picking up the boulder.

Yes, you can place it there. Let your eyes open.

The other thing to say is that one of the things that most helps all of us in this journey is community. We started taking refuge in the Sangha with that funny story, but Sangha as community—we can't do it alone. I don't know if you have a connection with a community online or where you are, but to join a group, to be part of something, helps because you can practice together and hear everybody else's stories and realize, "Oh, we're doing this together. We're holding this together." Do you have any connection with community yet?

I do.

What's the community?

My friends.

And are they interested in the same things, including this kind of awakening compassion?

Some are. I think some of it too is feeling shame around some of my stories, but that's okay.

So feel the shame too and put your hands on your heart. You don't have to make the shame go away. You don't have to shame the shame, because it's really trying to protect you.

It's trying to say, "All right, I want you to be better." It believes that. The fact is that you are good—that you're actually good and beautiful. But the shame is taught to you, and it's a fear. Hold it and say, "Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm actually fine, thank you. I'm just fine. I'm good just now." And then you can put the shame in the lap of Kuan Yin or Mother Mary and say, "You carry this for all the young women who feel shame. You carry this. I'm fine, thank you."

So much tenderness. You're doing great.

And I think beyond your friends, it would be useful to look for an online meditation community, or depending on where you live, some place where you can connect with others who are actually meditating and dealing with the same things that we do as we open our hearts and our minds. Look for that. And thank you for your honesty. You're actually doing really well, just so you know.

Take care.

With this, I think we'll pause for the evening. It feels like enough.

I hope you take whatever was a reminder into yourself—from the meditation, the stories, the conversations we've just had—whatever reminds you of the goodness in your own heart. And in this week of the illumination of the light, remember that you are that light, that you are the light of awareness itself come into this body. As the Buddha's last words said, make of yourself a light. Let that love and light, that illumination of awareness that you are, shine through.

Thank you, and be safe and well. See you again. Good night.

CHAPTER 122

Meditation: Summer Solstice | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 26 min

> *In this guided meditation offered during the week of the summer solstice, Jack Kornfield shares a unique approach to mettā (loving-kindness) practice that he learned from his wife and teaching colleague Trudy Goodman, who received it from a Sri Lankan monk during a retreat at Insight Meditation Society. This body-focused loving-kindness meditation moves systematically through each part of the body—head, neck and shoulders, arms and hands, torso, pelvis, legs, and feet—offering wishes of well-being, happiness, and healing to each area.*
>
> *What makes this practice distinctive is the weaving together of traditional mettā phrases with imagery of light and luminosity, appropriate for celebrating the season of greatest light. Kornfield guides practitioners to fill each body part with both loving-kindness and the sense of radiant light, culminating in experiencing oneself as a 'being of light' and a 'beacon of kindness.' The meditation then naturally expands outward, extending these wishes to all beings and all bodies everywhere.*
>
> *Kornfield emphasizes that there are many versions of loving-kindness practice—what he calls '108,000 skillful means'—and encourages practitioners to explore and discover which approaches genuinely open their hearts. The invitation is not to judge oneself by the practice, but to find what truly serves one's awakening to loving-kindness, compassion, and peaceful presence.*

So in a minute, I'd like us to take time to meditate, maybe twenty or thirty minutes. The practice I'd like to lead tonight I learned from my beloved Judy Goodman, my wife and teaching colleague and just dear one. She learned this during a long retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts from a wonderful old Sri Lankan monk. At first—I'll use part of it anyway—at first it seemed to her a little bit silly, but then as she did it, she found out that it was powerful and she loved it.

It was a kind of metta or loving-kindness practice directed first toward our own body with such simple phrases as "may my head be well, be strong, be happy," or "may my arms and hands be well"—a kind of well-wishing to the body. Tonight, because it's the week of the summer solstice, the time of greatest light, I want to weave in an image of light as well for those of you who find that it works. If the light doesn't work, then the feeling of kindness can work, or both together. Let's see what happens.

Let's begin simply. Find a way to sit that's comfortable and at ease. It's hard to do loving-kindness practice—and this is one variety of it—if your body's in a lot of pain. Although you can, you might then want to shift actually to tenderness and compassion and mercy. But for this, let your body be at ease. Take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this remarkable human form that you've been given, and let your eyes close gently.

First, just take a few long, deep breaths in and out. With each breath, let go of whatever obvious tension or tightness you can so that you can be here more fully. Even though we use words, and sometimes they can bring up other feelings—it can feel mechanical, or even bring up their opposite, worries or fears—let this practice be like planting seeds. Just trust as you go along that something interesting may happen, especially if you're new to it.

Now bring a mindful, loving awareness, a loving attention, to this body that you've been given, that almost all of us treasure when it comes down to it. If you step off the curb and a car comes whizzing around the corner, without any thought you jump back out of the way, because your body itself loves life, wants to preserve itself, wants to preserve all the good things that make life possible.

So this precious body, as it's called in the texts—bring your attention, your kind attention, first to your head. Feel what's there. It might be tension or tightness in the scalp, sensations around the eyes, incipient tears or incipient smile, holding in the jaw. Let the face soften and the eyes be soft.

Begin: May my head be at ease, be well, be happy. As you wish this, as you offer this loving-kindness to all the parts of your head—the eyes and ears and tongue, the remarkable nose—imagine, with this loving-kindness, that you can fill your head with light, the beautiful light of your awareness. Feel or imagine that light, the light that comes in through your eyes, can fill your head. May my head be filled with loving-kindness. May it be well, healed.

Now let your attention, your loving awareness, drop down a little bit through your neck and shoulders. So much is carried in your shoulders—like Sisyphus sometimes, carrying burdens up and down, steadying yourself. Feel all that's there, both the tensions and the strength, the courage, the voice. Let the field of loving-kindness fill your throat and your neck and your shoulders. May my neck and shoulders that carry so much, may they be at ease. May they be well, healed, and happy. Sense or feel, if you can, a lightness or literal light. If it works for you, feel your shoulders and neck and head now all with a sense of light, and certainly with tenderness, kindness.

Now your arms and hands, all the way from your shoulders down through your upper arms and lower. May these arms that do so much, that carry so much—may these hands that touch and move and create and cook and love, these hands that do so much, these wrists—may these arms and wrists and hands be filled with kindness. May they be happy and well and strong. Offer this loving-kindness, feeling the courage of your arms and hands. May they be filled with light, lightness of being, luminous light and care.

Now feel your whole chest, the front and back, your whole torso. Your lungs that breathe and connect you with the ocean of air. The heart that pumps. All the inner organs of digestion—stomach, liver—the organs that keep your body going. And your back, the strength of your spine, that which keeps you upright, the bodily courage. Fill it all with loving-kindness, your whole torso. May my heart and lungs, my whole torso, be filled with loving-kindness and the sweetness of light. May my heart and lungs and all the insides be happy and well and healed.

Be filled with the light of loving kindness. And if it works to be filled with the luminosity of light, let the whole of your upper body now be filled with light and loving kindness.

And now let the loving kindness care drop down into your pelvis—the bowl of your pelvis that carries the whole of your upper body. Your hips, your sacrum, your genitals, all those tender parts, the lower belly and the pelvis. Let the loving kindness fill this whole dimension of your mysterious body with care.

May this whole pelvis, sacrum, hips, the bowl of pelvis, my genitals—all of it be filled with loving kindness. Be happy. Imagine that—be happy. Be healed and well, strong. And let the luminous quality of loving kindness, as light or tenderness or both, fill your pelvis as it has filled all the rest—strong and tender and loving.

Now move this loving attention down through your legs. Your strong legs, your thighs, your knees, your calves, shins, and all the great bones of your legs that move you and hold you up and carry you. Feel the strength of your legs and wish them well. Fill them with loving kindness.

May my legs be filled with loving kindness. May they be happy moving, dancing, standing, walking, running. May they be happy. May they be well and healed and strong. Let the loving kindness and the light of the loving kindness, the illumination, touch and fill these legs. And if it works, fill them with light—shining the light of love and attention.

And now let this loving kindness drop down to ankles and feet. I think of the line from Jimmy Cliff: "My feet is my only carriage." These feet that carry you so many places, that you stand upon and connect with this body of the earth. The flexibility of your ankles. Let the loving kindness fill your ankles and feet, all the way to your toes, your heels. With gratitude, loving kindness.

May my feet and ankles be filled with loving kindness every step of the way—standing and walking. May they be happy. Happy feet. May they be well and strong and healed. Feel the illumination of loving kindness fill your feet.

And if it works for you, let yourself join the tenderness and loving kindness with the feeling or the image, the sense of your body now filled with light—lightness and light itself. For you are a being of light. Sense the whole of your body, the energy field of this life you've been given.

May my whole body be filled with loving kindness. Be filled with luminous kindness. May my whole body be happy. Strong and healed and happy.

And even though you may be in difficult circumstances at times, as we all can be, let yourself feel or imagine that you can walk around where you live, with the people that surround you and the community around, shining—loving kindness filled within your body, light and luminous, shining from your eyes and your spirit. Feel that you can meet people from this place of loving kindness and strength. That you are like a lamp or a beacon.

And let the loving kindness of your heart and your body and your spirit now shine out. Just as "may my body be happy" illuminates this body with kindness, so now extend: may your bodies be happy. May your hearts and spirits be happy. All those around.

Rest quietly as a beacon of kindness in this mysterious body, drinking the waters of this earth, breathing the ocean of oxygen and air, resting on the mother of this earth that gave you this body. May you shine out. May all bodies—all bodies—be happy. Be well, healed. Be awakened to loving kindness, all of them.

Rest in a luminous field of metta, in whatever way opens your heart and spirit and body to love, tenderness, courage, and kindness.

This is one beautiful version of the practice of loving kindness and metta. There are many, many versions.

You can go online and find beautiful versions from Sharon Salzberg and Trudy Goodman and Tara Brach and Sylvia Boorstein and Howie Cohen and so many of our Spirit Rock teachers. It doesn't always work for each person—there are many different versions, and many other practices of compassion and equanimity and peaceful heart, practices of joy, deep practices of mindful, loving awareness.

So if it served you, use it, remember it, practice it. If it didn't feel quite right, that's totally fine. The point of these practices is not to use them to judge yourself, but to begin to learn that which opens the flower of your heart, that opens the vision of your mind to something vast, that invites you to come back to who you really are.

Take them. There are one hundred and eight thousand skillful means and meditations. Listen and take the ones that serve you.

CHAPTER 123

Meditation: Listening with the Heart

Jack Kornfield · 24 min

> *In this gentle guided meditation, Jack Kornfield leads practitioners through a progressive deepening of awareness, beginning with settling into embodied presence through breath and body relaxation. The practice moves through layers of listening—first to the body's wisdom and messages, then to the heart's feelings and counsel, and finally to the mind's stream of thoughts and deeper understanding.*
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> *Kornfield draws on the Sufi concept of sobet, an intimate conversation of the heart, to illuminate this quality of tender, respectful listening. The meditation cultivates what he calls "mindful loving awareness"—a quality of witnessing that holds whatever arises with kindness and compassion. Rather than doing or fixing, practitioners are invited to simply receive the wisdom that body, heart, and mind naturally offer when we become quiet enough to listen.*
>
> *The practice then expands outward, extending this same compassionate listening to the natural world—trees, birds, seasons—and to the people in our lives. Kornfield suggests that by quieting ourselves and listening with the heart, we can sense the hopes, fears, longings, and love of those around us. This deep listening becomes a foundation for wise and loving response, arising as naturally as breath. The meditation offers a practical method for developing presence, compassion, and connection that can be carried into daily life and relationships.*

When you're ready, let your eyes close gently. Take two or three deep breaths—a slow in-breath, an out-breath. With each out-breath, release whatever you can to help you be more fully present, and allow the tensions carried in the body to soften.

Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, roll your head in a circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily. Let your belly relax as well, and let the breath breathe itself naturally, with ease. Soft belly.

Feel the weight of your body, gravity pulling you onto your seat, onto the earth. Let go so you can feel yourself fully supported from the earth below. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, simply begin to notice how the body is breathing itself. You don't have to do anything when it breathes in and out this ocean of air that we share with all other creatures. Feel the breath—the coolness in the nostrils, or swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly—and relax with the breathing.

As you feel each breath, let it be an invitation for the mind to quiet and the heart to soften. Just as you can feel the body breathing itself gently, trustworthy, you can relax and trust the breath to come and go, and the heart to beat, and all of the organs and functions of the body miraculously taking place. You become the quiet, mindful, loving awareness of this mystery.

As you sit quietly, let the listening heart deepen. First, listening to the body. In this quiet, let your attention go to some part of your body that wants to speak to you—to remind you, to instruct or inform you, to ask for your attention or your understanding. You can know. As you sense this part of your body, let an intuitive understanding come of what drew you here and what you need to know. If you listen, the body will tell you.

Now open the lens, the field of your awareness, to sense the whole body as a field of sensation and aliveness—tingling and warmth and cool, vibration, pleasures and pain. If your body had a message for you now, as you listen kindly, what does it want you to know, to understand, to remember or tend?

In the Sufi tradition, this is called *sobet*, an intimate conversation of the heart. You are listening to the body kindly, tenderly, respectfully.

Now bring the same mindful, loving awareness, the deep listening, to the heart. Just as there is a stream of body sensations and energy and information, the heart carries so many feelings and emotions. Listen to the compassionate heart that can hold all these feelings and emotions with tenderness. Let your heart remind you of the feelings you need to listen to. You can know. Receive with compassion and kindness. What does your heart want you to understand now, at this miraculous time in your life? Listen to its counsel, its instruction.

In the background, the body gently breathes itself, and you become the listening heart.

Now shift the same mindful, loving awareness to the mind. The mind produces—it secretes thoughts, word thoughts and picture thoughts and images and stories and memories. The stream of the mind, the mind stream. You are the loving awareness, the witness that feels the stream of the mind, that knows it—all the busyness and hopes

and ideas and ways of trying to keep you safe and care. The wisest understanding of the mind has a message for you. It has wisdom that you need just now. Listen to the wisdom mind, to what it will tell you, what it reminds you.

Now let the field of loving awareness open so the listening heart remembers you can listen to the world around you with the same tender care. You can listen to the pine trees and the maples, their sound in the wind, the deeper voices of their wisdom. You can listen to the hummingbird and the sparrow and the squirrel, the changing of seasons. They will speak to you when you are quiet. They will remind you of tenderness and compassion and courage.

And with the same mindful loving awareness, you can listen to those around you—family and friends, each one in turn—seeing and hearing, yes. But as you quiet yourself, you can listen with the heart to their songs, to their fears and hopes and longings and love and pain. And by listening with a compassionate heart and a wisdom mind, breathing gently, your understanding can grow. Your connection can grow. Your loving response will arise as natural as the next breath.

Or you can listen to the whole world and beyond, with its ten thousand joys and sorrows. And you are the listening heart—steady and safe, tender and wise. This deep listening is your gift. All things will tell you how to live, how to respond, how to love.

And when you're ready, in your own time, allow your eyes to open gently. Maybe bring a soft half smile to your lips. And tune into the sense of calm and steadiness, of loving presence that you have opened in your own body and heart and mind.

CHAPTER 124

Listening with the Heart | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · 50 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from July 2021, Jack Kornfield invites us to cultivate a different quality of attention—listening with the heart rather than the analytical mind. Speaking during the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic, he reflects on how difficulties have always been gateways to discovering what is indestructible within us, drawing on his teacher Ajahn Chah's teaching that our deepest learning comes through challenges rather than ease.*
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> *Kornfield shares a remarkable story of the Tibetan physician Yeshe Dunden examining a patient at Yale Medical School, holding her pulse in profound presence for thirty minutes and diagnosing her heart condition through deep listening rather than modern instruments. This becomes a metaphor for how we might meet one another and our world—with the quality of attention that truly receives and understands. He also recounts how Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi's foremost disciple, walked across India listening to villagers, catalyzing one of history's largest land reforms through simple presence and care.*
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> *The teaching points toward the Buddha's instructions on inclining the heart: when others are cruel, we cultivate kindness; when others grasp, we practice generosity; when confusion arises, we respond with compassion. Kornfield reminds us that we have been training for these difficulties our whole lives, and that by quieting the mind and listening deeply, we can access the wisdom, compassion, and love that are already present. The practice is not complicated—it is about tending to small beginnings with integrity and care, trusting that our smallest acts of listening and kindness ripple outward into the world.*

I'd like to speak tonight on a theme that was central to the meditation we just did—on listening.

And I invite you to listen, not to take notes. There's no quiz, no exam, just listening to sense what this reminds you of. If there's something of value, something that touches a wisdom you already carry, let it awaken that within you. And if not, just let it go.

Here we are, July 2021. We were hoping to be post-pandemic, but we're not out of the woods yet with the variants and the spread of COVID in many parts of the world that don't even have vaccines—which is almost immoral, I'm sorry to say. This along with the ongoing global dilemmas of climate change and the struggles for social, economic, and racial justice. And here we are in the middle of all this.

We have uncertainty. We don't know if we can travel. We don't know about school even. And of course there's worry or anxiety, and even kvetching and moaning about it all. And yet what we're called upon to do—kvetching has its time and anxiety has its place—but somehow underneath it, we're called upon to meet this time with our best spirit.

From the perspective of wisdom, difficulties have a purpose. My teacher, Ajahn Chah, would ask us sometimes: Where did you learn more? Where did you learn your wisdom? Where did your heart learn—when things were easy or when they were difficult? And he would smile. You know the answer.

This from the Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim, who writes: "The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not as a consequence turn to those friends who offer them refuge and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out those who faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a human being exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them." Facing dangers in this way with daring, facing difficulties—this is the gateway.

And so this is both personal for us as we go through difficulties. It's also true for us as a society and for us as a global community of humanity. How do we respond?

A friend of mine who works at one of the big online meditation platforms asked me if I would do a show on post-pandemic practice. And I reflected about it because I think we all have some mild forms of trauma from the pandemic, and it's still ongoing—our pandemic PTSD, depending on how you have lived with it and how you've been attuned to those around you and the suffering globally.

In difficulties, our bodies go into fight, flight, or freeze. We get a kind of limbic hijack, the survival brain. Will things be okay? Will it touch me? Will it touch my children, my family? What will happen? And so we have worry and anxiety, or grief for what we've lost. Or just the fact that it's been long—long haul in some ways for all of us, even though some who've had COVID have had severe long-haul COVID.

And then we're supposed to come out, and I remember seeing someone on the street wearing a t-shirt that says, "Now that the virus is subsiding, I still don't want to see you." Kind of the message of the introvert who loved the stillness of this time.

Our minds are trying to figure this out, to plan and rehash, figure out the future, make things better or safe for ourselves as we navigate. But remember the passage from Mark Twain: "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."

So what is the alternative? The invitation is to live here and now in the reality of the present, which is all we have. To breathe as we did in the meditation. To quiet the mind. To listen to the heart. And in this listening, here in the present, to find wisdom, compassion, and love.

Being in the present reduces the stress of trying to figure it all out. It's not that we don't have to make appropriate plans, but we can plan a little bit and live here a lot. And as Nelson Mandela said, when things are difficult, just tie your shoes and keep walking in the right direction.

In this phase of the pandemic, in this cycle of climate change, in this political time, in this time of humanity on this earth coming to terms with the unbearable beauty of this world and the ocean of tears—we'd like to figure out how to navigate it properly.

But we don't actually know. Even as you've come out of the pandemic—maybe you used to like parties, but do you really want to be at a party? How does it feel at first? It's exciting, but then I kind of also like taking walks by the river. I kind of also liked taking time with those I love, or taking tea, or reading, or listening to something that nourishes me. No one's ever been in this time, in this place before, you know. Like Somerset Maugham, who said there are three rules for writing the great English novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

So we're in an unknown time. Then what?

As you open loving awareness, as you sit and quiet yourself, you become the witness—the one who knows, Ajahn Chah's phrase for the witnessing consciousness. And there opens a bigger perspective: the turning of the seasons, the rise and fall of ideologies. As it says in the Tao, there's a time for being ahead and a time for being behind. A time for being in motion and a time for being at rest. A time for being vigorous and a time for being exhausted. A time that we are in danger and a time for being saved. As Ecclesiastes says.

And when we step back, we begin to see the rhythms of life unfolding. Then we can sense how we might respond to the rise and fall of all the things we're subject to—in our personal life, in our collective society.

I think about that wonderful conversation in the Book of Joy that I've mentioned in previous talks, between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, asking them how they can be happy after the sufferings they've seen—of apartheid, or the loss of the culture and monasteries in Tibet. And they laugh, they tease each other. As the Dalai Lama said, "So much has been taken from me. Why should I let them take my happiness?" And Tutu teases him, and he teases Tutu about his big nose, and Tutu teases him about his hat. They start kind of wrestling like young boys. Then Tutu stops and says, "Hey, we're supposed to be holy men. Cut that out!"

But then they say more deeply: If sorrow brings us together, let some good and joy be born of this. Let some sweetness come, even from what we've been through.

And the next volume, if you will, of the same spirit—created by Doug Abrams, who helped with the Dalai Lama and Tutu's Book of Joy—is a new book, the Book of Hope, coming out at the end of the summer, by Jane Goodall. The conversation in the book is about what it means to have hope in the midst of the loss of species and the rising oceans and the shifting environment. Jane talks about amazement and resilience, about the power of the younger generation to start things anew, and the indomitable human spirit. She says, "I've seen so much. I have to go on because I care. I care passionately about nature, about children, about life itself." And hope is really spirited out of care.

So all these are beautiful reminders. The question is, how do we practice?

Mindful loving awareness invites a deep listening—to step out of the thrall of time and listen in a deeper and different way.

When you read the Book of Hope, which I hope you get to see when it comes out, Jane Goodall talks about Professor Louis Leakey, who sent her into the jungle to study the live chimps, hoping it would help him understand the skeletons he was discovering in the Olduvai Gorge. He gave her a grant for six months. She sat and watched and peered and looked. After five months, she still couldn't get close to them. She was almost despairing, but she said she had tenacity and patience. In the last month, a chimp she named David Graybeard decided to come close and study her as she was studying him. Eventually he showed the other chimps that it was safe, and he began to show her the tools he used to pull the ants out of the anthill so he could eat them, the ways the chimps lived. And it all came from her listening.

Here's one of my favorite stories about listening. It's by Richard Selzer, one of the great essayists and a surgeon at Yale University in the medical school. He writes:

On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work, there appeared an announcement: "Yeshi Dhonden will make rounds at 6 a.m. on June 10th." The particulars were given, with a note: "Yeshi Dhonden is personal physician to the Dalai Lama."

I'm not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Thus on the morning of June 10th, I joined the clutch of white coats waiting in a small conference room adjacent to the ward selected for the grand rounds. The air in the room was heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement.

At precisely six o'clock, he materialized—a short, golden, barrelly man dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon. His scalp was shaven. He bowed in greeting while his young interpreter made introductions. Yeshe Donden, we were told, would examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis was as unknown to Yeshe Donden as it was to us. He would examine the patient in our presence, after which we would reconvene and discuss the case. We were further informed that for the past two hours, Yeshe Donden had purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer. I, having performed my lesser ablutions and given no thought at all to my soul, glanced furtively at my colleagues. Suddenly we seemed as soiled and uncouth a lot.

The patient had been awakened early and told she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and had been asked to produce a fresh specimen of urine. So when we entered her room, the woman showed no surprise. She had long taken on that mixture of compliance and resignation that comes with illness. But this, for her, was going to be another in an endless series of tests and examinations.

Yeshe Donden stepped to the bedside while the rest of us stood apart, watching. For a long time, he gazed at the woman, and I too studied her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gave a clue to the nature of her disease. At last, he took her hand, resting it in both of his own. Now he bent over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robes, his eyes closed as he felt for her pulse.

For the next half hour, he remained thus—an exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seemed to have been drawn into this one purpose. From the foot of the bed where I stood, it was as though he and the patient had entered a special place of apartness and silence, about which a vacancy hovered. After a moment, the woman rested back on the pillow. From time to time, she raised her head to look at the strange figure. I could not see their hands joined in this correspondence that was intimate and exclusive, but I

was envious—not of him, not of Yeshe Donden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I wanted to be held like that, touched so, received. And I knew that I, who have palpated a thousand pulses, had not felt a single one.

At last, Yeshe Donden straightened, gently placed the woman's hand on the bed, and stepped back. The interpreter produced a small wooden bowl, and he poured a small portion of the urine specimen and proceeded to whip the liquid with two sticks. Then, as he had done in bowing above the pulse, he inhaled the odor three times, set down the bowl, and turned to leave. All the while, he had not uttered a single word.

As he neared the door, the woman raised her head and called out in an urgent voice, "Thank you, doctor," and touched with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist. Yeshe Donden turned back for a moment to gaze at her, then stepped into the conference room.

He spoke now in Tibetan, in sounds I had never heard, translated. He spoke of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he said—the last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. And through it charged the full waters of her river, as a mountain stream cascades in spring, battering, knocking loose the land, flooding her breath. He was silent.

"May we now have the diagnosis?" the professor asked—the host of these rounds, the man who knew the answer. "Congenital heart disease. Interventricular septal defect with resultant heart failure."

A gateway in the heart, I thought, that must not be opened, through which charged the full waters of her breath. So here is the doctor, listening not for distant signs of disease but for stirrings of spirit, as if in prayer. I know now. Now and then, as it happens, as I make my own rounds, it is as if I can hear the sounds of his voice, like an ancient Buddhist prayer whose meaning has long since been forgotten. I remember only this: the music, and a jubilation that possesses me, and I feel myself touched by something divine.

It is such a tender story. It is a beautiful story of listening. And this is what is asked of us in all these ways—in politics, in the ending of the pandemic, in addressing the climate—because all the difficulties are symptoms. They are symptoms rooted in the human heart that has been mistakenly taken over by separateness, by fear, greed, hatred, and anger, and underneath all that, by our pain.

Thomas Merton asks, of what use is it to travel to the moon if we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from one another and ourselves?

So in this time of difficulties, with a listening heart, instead of turning on one another, we can turn to one another. When my beloved Trudy went to work in the Darfur refugee camps in Chad with the anti-genocide group, the main thing they did for quite a time was simply sit down with the women and listen to them and ask, "What do you need?" And they said, "We need preschool for our children so they can understand that they can learn and grow. We need soccer, so our children feel like they're part of a greater world." What NGO would have imagined that, bringing in their supplies? But now there's Darfur United, a global entry in the soccer teams of the unrecognized nations. And the hundreds of thousands in the camps are so proud. We have to listen more deeply.

A friend of mine, a celebrated filmmaker, was so worried about her son, who's an artist and a musician. She said, "I'm giving him money because he doesn't make much as an artist, but I'm afraid I'm ruining his life. Doesn't he need to go out there and get some other job and make money?" And I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know. Why don't you ask him?" So we got together, sat down, and she asked him. He said, "Oh no, this is perfect. I love being an artist like you as a filmmaker, but I don't make a lot of money from it. You've had that great success, but this is exactly what I want to do. I want to make more art and music, and you are my patron, and I'm so grateful." She said she didn't know that's how he wanted to live, and they both laughed. She actually cried.

What does it mean to speak to and listen to one another in this way? In the Tao it says, "Do you have the patience to let the mud settle till the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right response arises by itself?"

One of the benefits from this terrible pandemic is that it's given us more time to quiet our mind, to listen to our heart, to listen as we did in the meditation. What is it that this body needs? What kind of care and attention? Thank you to this body for caring so much. What is it in our heart that needs to be accepted, that needs to be loved, understood? Thank you, heart, big heart, for caring so much—tender, compassionate heart. Thank you.

What is it in the rhythm of our life that we want and need to listen to? You can tell. It will tell you. What is it in our family, the society around us, the earth that we inhabit, that is our body? We are the body of the earth. By listening—and listening deeply, listening with the heart—you can know.

One of my favorite stories is of the foremost follower of Mahatma Gandhi, named Vinoba Bhave. After Gandhiji was assassinated, the entire Gandhian freedom movement that gained freedom for India from the British colonial empire was in disarray and fell apart. In the year that followed, some people began to gather again and say, "There's still work to be done in our country. We must carry on Gandhi's spirit." So they decided on a gathering in Gandhi's spirit and asked Vinoba if he would please come and lead the meeting. But he demurred and said, "No, it's far away. Gandhiji is gone, and we cannot just recreate it the way that it was." They begged him: "Please, please, this is so important. His legacy must be carried on." Finally Vinoba agreed to go, but he said, "You must postpone it for six months so I can walk there."

And he walked more than halfway across India, stopping at one village after another. In the first village, he sat under the banyan tree in the middle of the village with some of the elders and people gathered there. He listened and asked, "What are the problems of this village, and what are the hopes?" One of the people who spoke up said, "We are part of the untouchable community, the Dalits in this village. We work so hard, but we have no way of taking care of our family. We cannot own land. We're not allowed. We haven't been given that kind of permission. We have no resources. What can the government do for us?"

Vinoba listened and spoke about the inspiration of Gandhi, the feeling that the people of India somehow could come to a solution. Hearing the suffering, the richest man in the village said, "You know, I have a great deal of land. How much land do these people need? I'm so honored by your coming and the connection to Gandhi." It was sixteen families. They each needed five acres. He said, "I will give eighty acres. Each family will have a plot." Vinoba said, "No, you must go back first to your family and make sure that they agree." The next morning they met again, and the man said, "I spoke with my wife, my children, my family, and I will give the eighty acres."

People celebrated. And when Vinoba walked to the next village and asked about their difficulties and their hopes, he heard a similar story. He told what had happened in the first village, and another wealthy man stood up and said, "Yes, in Gandhiji's name, I will give acres to these families." And he went on and on. In six months, he had collected 2,800 acres.

At that conference, when he told this story, he began what was called the Bhoodan Land Reform Movement, where Vinobaji and his followers walked on foot through every province and almost every district in India. Over the next few years, they collec-

ted 14 million acres of land, given to the poorest of the poor in these villages. It was one of the biggest transfers of land ever in modern history—and all because Vinoba walked and listened.

When you listen, you can sense the universal truths. Grasping and greed, hatred and ignorance cause suffering. Clarity of wisdom and truthfulness, love instead of hate, generosity instead of clinging, gratitude—it's not that complicated.

I was asked to be part of a group of well-known spiritual leaders, serving as advisors to a group at Facebook. Among these spiritual leaders—rabbis, priests, Muslim clerics, and others—there was appreciation for the fact that Facebook allows people around the world to connect, whether in faith communities or in all kinds of other communities. There was celebration of that. But then came great concern about the hate speech, about the anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic rhetoric, about the antisemitism. These were all raised as problems. What can we do about this? What can Facebook do?

Then there were concerns about not just hate speech, but also false speech—lies and untruths, the kind of ignorance being promulgated. What can Facebook do about this, the group raised?

I noted, "Well, you've gotten two of the roots of human suffering from Buddhist psychology—hatred and ignorance—but you've forgotten about greed. What about the fact that the online world makes an enormous amount of money, and some of it comes from getting children and teenage girls to look at themselves compared to others in unhealthy ways? Some of it comes from promoting fearful material, the worst of human ideas and images that attract us in some way."

So I raised this question: What about the greed? What about the way it's designed? Is it really healthy?

They asked me if I had any suggestions. I came back and said, "Yes. Reflecting for a little while, Facebook's valuation is over a trillion dollars. How about if Facebook took 10% of its valuation, 10% of its annual income—that would be $100 billion—and used it to solve some important and pressing problem? You don't need that extra 10%. Use that $100 billion to end homelessness in the US. You could get a place for all the half million homeless people on the streets. Or use that money to get laptops or iPads and medicine for every child in the refugee camps around the world."

They said, "We'll think about it." I'm waiting for their answer.

But you know the ancient truth: hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. Love. Generosity. Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see—that's Mark Twain again.

When my twin brother, who died a few years ago of leukemia, was at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute around Harvard Medical School, I spent a long time with him there. Part of what was so touching was to see patients who come from all around the world to this great medical center with their families. The families, like I was as a twin, were there with so much care and love and tenderness, trying to help. Because my brother had leukemia, there were all these blood donations and transfusions and platelet donations. You could just feel the field of care that had poured in.

It's like Mr. Rogers' mother, who said, "When there's a disaster, don't just look at the hurricane and the floods and the typhoon and the earthquake. Look at the helpers. Watch and see the human response that pours in from all over."

Oh nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of the awakened ones, remember these truths. Remember this deep listening. You know it.

If all the beasts were gone, men would soon die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

We know this in our hearts. And when you know this, then you join together and you join your spirit with billions of others. Even in the course of this talk, there have been a thousand, a million, a billion acts of a mother putting rice gruel or scrambled eggs or peanut butter and jelly on the table for her child, of a father tending to a daughter or a son, offering them help, of so many who are tending the plots of land around them, who are attending one another in gracious ways, who are just being polite and kind, standing in line, waiting as a group of human beings to do what we need to do in harmony with those around us.

Gandhi remembered saying, "When I despair"—so he did too—"I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it—always."

It takes a kind of humility. Not my strong suit, by the way. It's not what we were taught in my family. We were taught to know things. And my brothers and I, we all have a lot of facts. They were actually really brilliant—architect, engineer, scientists, ge-

neticists—all kinds of skills. Boat captains and amazing chefs and all these things that my brothers and I have learned and worked with. But underneath, I know the importance of not really having the answer, of humility.

I know it when I've sat on retreats for forty-five years and come together for those tender meetings of people in the middle of their ten-day or two or three months of meditation, just to sit and listen, to gaze at them, to notice the energy of their body, to feel the emotions that are visible emanating from their heart and mind, to hear the stories they tell. To be able to listen in that way and feel intuitively: How can I respond and remind them of something bigger? Of compassion to hold it all. Of the witnessing wisdom. Of the steadiness of the heart that's possible. Humility, a willingness to really listen and trust. We're a part of such a great mystery.

A story I haven't told for a time, and one of my favorites, is of the great Sioux medicine man Black Elk. This beloved story is told in his biography by John Neihardt called *Black Elk Speaks*, one of the great spiritual testaments to the wisdom holders and elders of this very land upon which we live—much of which was taken, most of which was taken. So we have to feel that in our hearts as well and listen as Black Elk tells us something.

In the last chapter of the book, it describes Black Elk's final hike up Harney Peak. The Sioux holy man had explained that when death approached, a Lakota could climb this sacred mountain to see if the Great Spirit approved of his life. Rain would fall on those who had the blessing of the Great Spirit.

As a young man, Black Elk had a vision that told him how to save his people and homeland from soldiers and settlers. He had this vision atop Harney Peak. And all these years he had worked to fulfill this vision and restore what he called the sacred hoop of life. Living through tragic circumstances and great loss, he felt that he had somehow failed and that the sacred hoop was broken.

On the day of his climb, Black Elk was a very old man. He dressed in red long johns, moccasins, war paint, and a feathered headdress. Slowly and laboriously, he climbed to the summit. Tourists were staring at him. Neihardt teased him that he should have picked a day with at least one cloud in the sky. But Black Elk rebuked him, saying that the rain would have nothing to do with the weather.

At the top of the peak, not far from the tourists, the old man lay down on the earth under a blue sky. To his astonishment, Neihardt watched as a small cloud formed over Black Elk and a soft rain began to fall. Black Elk wept with relief. He felt that even though he had not succeeded in fulfilling his vision, the Great Spirit was recognizing that he had done his best.

Sometimes we don't know what will be the fruits of what we do, but the secret is to act beautifully without attachment to the fruit of the action. And even our smallest things can make a difference.

Someone wrote to thank me. "My teenage daughter began to have seizures. It was really scary before they were properly medicated. I was terrified and she was as well. And it involved many drives over some distance to the clinic to regulate her and get the tests and medicine. And to help me, I began to listen to your dharma talks. And my teenage daughter, who would never have listened, began to listen too."

And after a few months of our going back and forth to the clinic, she would say, "Do you have another talk of Jack's to put on?" "It helped us a lot," she wrote. "Thank you."

Listen, dear ones. You have been training for these difficulties for a long time—for your whole life, and if you want to be amused, probably for many lifetimes. And you know what it means to listen and to care and to choose wisely.

The teachings from the Buddha: "Others will be cruel. We shall not be cruel, but be kind. Thus, we will incline the heart. Others will be greedy. We shall be generous. Thus, we will incline the heart. Others will speak maliciously and untruthfully. We will speak truthfully and kindly. Thus, we shall incline the heart. Others will be arrogant. We shall have humility. Thus, we will incline the heart. Others will lack mindfulness and care. We will cultivate mindfulness and care. Thus, we will incline the heart. Others will respond with fear and confusion. We will respond with compassion. Thus, we will incline the heart."

In times of uncertainty—this is called "the most uncertain hour" by one of my favorite poet-songwriters—in times of uncertainty, it's not complicated. When we listen with the heart, we tend our business with integrity and care. We stand up for justice and against injustice, against racism, against all those things that would denigrate a human being. We act beautifully—billions of acts in this hour, breathtaking in scale, from flower box to cathedral.

Trudy said the greeting for her when she was in the Darfur refugee camps was not "How are you?" but "How is your family?" We are each other's bond. We are each other's community. We are each other's family. And what we most want, perhaps under it all, is to be listened to in the deepest way, to be met with the heart.

I think of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," where he talks about the holy or the broken heart: "Even though it all went wrong, I stand before the Lord of song with nothing on my lips but hallelujah."

Big things in the world can only be achieved, it says in the Tao, by tending to their small beginnings. And Jane Goodall, in her beautiful book—and interview that was recently in the New York Times a few days ago—says, "You just plod on and do what you can to make the world a better place." But she said it with such a beautiful smile and such a caring heart. And you know she's planting the seeds, and she has for a lifetime that has touched us all.

We can do this. We can listen with the heart, and then the heart will respond.

Thank you, dear ones.

CHAPTER 125

Breath of the Earth Meditation | Monday Night

Jack Kornfield · 21 min

> *Jack Kornfield leads a gentle 20-25 minute guided meditation centered on breath awareness as a gateway to stillness and presence. The practice begins with establishing a comfortable, stable posture and using the breath as an anchor—not to become skilled at breathing, but to allow each inhalation and exhalation to carry a whispered invitation toward calm and ease.*
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> *The meditation explores a beautiful understanding of breath as the earth breathing herself through us, encouraging practitioners to relax into this natural rhythm rather than controlling it. Kornfield guides listeners to let thoughts, emotions, and sensations rise and fall like ocean waves around the steady point of the breath. This approach reflects the classic ānāpānasati practice while emphasizing the quality of spacious, effortless awareness rather than concentrated effort.*
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> *The final portion of the meditation invites reflection on the beautiful qualities we carry in our hearts—steadiness, compassion, caring attention, presence—and how we might offer these gifts to the world. Rather than framing this as resolution or striving, Kornfield points to the inherent goodness already present within, waiting to be brought forth from a place of stillness. The practice concludes with the traditional half-smile of the Buddha, connecting inner peace with the outward expression of wisdom and care in this "mysterious, magnificent, troubled, amazing world."*

And so tonight, let's begin with a meditation, a very simple one.

Let yourself settle, be comfortable and at ease for the next twenty or twenty-five minutes in a posture that feels stable and steady. When you're ready, let your eyes close gently. Take a couple of long breaths and exhale whatever wants to be let go of, so you can be just here and now.

When you take your seat in the middle of the turning world, as your world travels around its star, the sun, in this moment you take a seat of listening and stillness. To help invite and establish that stillness, it is good to begin with attention, a mindful loving awareness of the breath—not to become a good breather, but with each breath that you feel through the nostrils and throat, whether the rise and fall of chest or belly, with each breath a gentle whisper in the background: calm, ease, allowing the whole body and heart and mind to settle. Nowhere to go. Just this breath, this moment.

If it's at all hard to sense the breath, you can put your hand on your belly. Leave it there and feel the belly rise and fall in the palm of your hand. Ease and calm with each breath, an invitation.

As you quiet, there will naturally be waves of thoughts and plans and memories, waves of emotions—sad and happy, worried and excited—waves of sensations, all the things that come and go, and sounds. Let these rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Rest with the breath like a still point between the waves of the sea. Let the other things come and go around the breath. The breath brings a stillness. With this breath, a steady, calm ease.

The breath breathes itself, its own rhythm, long or short, shallow or deep. Your breath is the earth breathing herself through you. Relax. Easy come, easy go. Let the earth breathe herself through you and invite a deepening stillness, openness, ease. Spacious, vast, easy—with each breath an invitation to open to presence and stillness.

Now, for the last minutes of the meditation, sitting quietly as the earth turns about the sun, let yourself reflect with the returning of the light. What beautiful qualities would you like to bring into the world in this year ahead? Not as a New Year's resolution, but the qualities you already carry in your heart: steadiness, calm, and stillness; caring attention, presence, compassion. These are gifts you can carry from this place of stillness and bring forth from your heart and your being—beautiful gifts into this mysterious, magnificent, troubled, amazing world.

From your own inner beauty and wisdom, what is it you wish to offer?

Add a smile to your lips, a half smile of the Buddha, as you sit. Feel what energy and gifts can come from you and through you. You can know.

Notable Dhamma Teachers

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield

The Monday Night talks and retreat teachings on the awakened heart (2016 onward)

125 talks · Jack Kornfield

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