The Seat of Awakening

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 52:05

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.

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