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

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:09:35

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.

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