Surprising Delights of Renunciation (Drop-in at Spirit Rock)

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:06:31

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 *Volun tary 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.

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