The Tender Heart of Life and Death

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 2:07:34

Good evening.

It's a pleasure to welcome you here to this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock. If we haven't met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and I'm here with my longtime good friend, Frank Ostaseski. I'm very pleased to share the night with you.

How many of you are here for the first time, just to know? Welcome. It's a particular pleasure to welcome you here. And if you saw a hand go up near you of someone who's new, when we get to the break, turn and introduce yourself to that person or welcome them.

Monday Night Sitting group has been ongoing now for thirty-two years. I keep track because it's the same age as my daughter. And Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley here through a whole community that's committed to the twin principles of wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, and of compassion. We received this beautiful land from the Nature Conservancy, asking us to steward and take care of it, and gradually the whole community itself has created and built this as a lovely retreat for people to come and quiet their minds and tend their hearts. We have all kinds of trainings and retreats—day long, week long, month long—for families, for educators, for special kinds of programs, for people in healthcare and all kinds of other areas. Frank also has been part of some of our wonderful programs.

Mostly what we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We sit for about half an hour, which I think we'll do tonight, with a little bit of instruction just for those who are new or as a reminder. Then we take a break, stretch or relax for a little bit, and come back together for some teachings, which will be both stories and teachings and some dialogue that we share.

It's so spring out there. It's pretty amazing to walk this land or other parts and feel, with the wild amount of water that we've had, how everything is just dancing and bursting open. The grass is saying, "Yes, me too," and everything is insanely green. Maybe it's a time for us also to kind of breathe and quiet down and let that spring come in inside ourselves.

Again, I'm very happy that you're here. Do you want to say hello, anything?

Frank: Just how delighted I am to be here with you, and how beautiful it is to have the green. We were commenting on the way up that here we are, almost in May, and we're still green. Fantastic. So good that we can have all that liveliness as a counterposition to our discussion tonight about death. They go together, don't they? Package deal.

Jack: That's it. So let's begin with some meditation practice.

Find a way to sit in which your body is comfortable and yet also alert. If you're in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Have some sense of dignity, sitting upright, but also gracious—like the king or queen on the throne. Present, easy on the cushions, however you sit. Let your body be at ease. You don't have to get in any kind of weird posture. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it from your spiritual practice.

When you've taken your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this mysterious human form, this human incarnation, you're ready to let your eyes close gently and just come into the present. Simple mindfulness or loving awareness of what is present here and now.

As you tune into your body, if there are any areas of obvious tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. You can roll your head in a circle if you like to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Relax the shoulders and let the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body and how gravity pulls you into contact with the chair, the floor, the cushion, and how the earth can completely support you. You can relax and let go in this seat on the earth. Let your belly be soft and breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to pay attention to the play of experience—what's present in body and heart and mind as you sit quietly, bringing attention to the aliveness of the moment, all that comes and goes.

After just a minute or two, you begin to notice how easily the attention drifts off to commentary and planning and remembering in other places.

So to deepen the sense of presence underneath the waves of thoughts and plans and remembering and sounds and ideas, become aware of the wave of the breath—how under all these things the body is breathing itself. Feel it wherever you can most easily: the coolness in the nostrils, swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's helpful, if it's hard to feel the breath, simply put your hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall in the palm of your hand for this sitting time.

As you rest with each breath coming in and out, let the sensations of breathing invite a quieting and calming of attention. Just this breath, breath by breath.

And again, after just a minute or two, you notice how the waves of thoughts and sounds and sensations pull the attention away from the breath. Quite natural. When you can be with the breath, let these waves rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. When one of the waves becomes quite strong and pulls you, then let go of attention to breath and, as if to greet it with the same loving awareness, as if with

a bow, acknowledge it—the feelings of sadness or excitement, longing, joy, or the thoughts: planning, remembering, or the sounds. As you name it gently, feel the energy of this wave move through the body and mind. Then when it subsides, when you're at ease with it, return back to feel a few more breaths.

Rest just here with each breath, or with the strong waves met with a kind attention. Rest in the reality of the present. Remember to keep the heart tender, to touch all that arises with the spirit of compassion. This breath, breathing itself. Or this moment's experience arising like a wave—sensations, feelings, thoughts—then passing away. You rest in stillness in the midst of it all.

Whatever is present, relax around it. The breath breathes itself. The sensations, the feelings, thoughts that arise come into the space of loving awareness, of mindfulness. Let them come as they come, go as they go. You are the witnessing, the kind attention that sees just what's here. This breath, this moment's experience, receive with loving awareness. Relax, present, easy and calm with each breath.

Now one little thing to say about meditation, especially mindfulness meditation. You sit and I talk about relaxing and calming, but it's not always that way. It's actually kind of wild in there.

There was this one Zen master with whom I trained years ago. There were all these ardent students in the 1970s asking, "When are we going to get enlightened? We've heard about the Zen awakening and all these things." And he would say, "You practice, you train, and soon you will get everything." We thought, well, we'll get all those good things, right? But after a year or two or three or however long of practice, it started to dawn on us that when he said, "You practice sincerely, you're present, you will get everything," that's really what you get when you sit. You get everything.

You get the unfinished business of the heart and the tears that want to come. You get the achiness of the body. You also get to hold it with compassion and tenderness. You get joy, the spring, but also the death of people that you love. All of that comes, and as you sit halfway between heaven and earth, you become the Buddha that you are, allowing all this to be received with a great heart of compassion and understanding.

So just to be clear about this, in case you had some ideas about what was going to happen.

And the last announcement is that on Saturday, the 29th, at Lake Merritt in Oakland, the coalition of Bay Area Buddhist groups are having a sit-in and a stand-in for climate and justice. A lot of the Spirit Rock teachers—Wes and James Barras, Donald Mark—will all be there. They won't be speaking because everybody's going to be silent. But there will be a great gathering of people sitting and afterward networking for climate justice.

Those are announcements. Take a little bit of a break. It's great that there's a little baby here. How old? Three weeks. This is a dharma baby getting the first taste in the temple. Well, welcome. How nice.

So please take a break for a bit. And my new book, and maybe Frank's, are out there for anyone who's interested.

Let's just sit quiet for one minute to let the cocktail party settle down just a little bit here. You don't even have to close your eyes.

So we talked about each of us speaking for ten, fifteen minutes or something and then see where it goes. Some kind of dialogue, storytelling, disagreements if we're lucky, whatever.

And it's also true that just about now we each have new books that have come out. Frank's *Five Invitations* and Jack's *No Time Like the Present*. This one's really good. Have you read it? I read excerpts. Yeah, right. That's what they say. You leaf through it. There's good stuff you missed in there. Anyway. I'm going to get myself a copy of that.

And it turns out, when I look at them—it's not that we're going to do book reading, we're going to do some teaching—but one of the things that strikes me in looking at both these books, and I love your book, by the way, I think it's really quite a magnificent book. Thank you. Congratulations. It's very cool.

What strikes me is that there's a very similar message in both books. And Frank can talk about his own with the subtitle, "Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully," and what does it mean to live a full life. And *No Time Like the Present*, the subtitle is "Finding Freedom, Joy, Love Right Where You Are."

I started by talking about how we can have a vision—an understandable one—of spiritual life as a development. You learn different practices and trainings, and you become more present and kinder and more insightful and wiser and so forth.

But often in that model, there's something out in the future that if you do it right, you'll get to, and then you'll be wise or good or whatever enlightened vision you have of a person. And so it's always something ahead.

What I say in this book, especially after all these years of teaching, is that there's another perspective which is called starting with the fruit, or starting with the result—living the fruit—in which you don't have to wait to be free. What's also true for us, yes these trainings are enormously helpful, but in any moment we can be truly present, we can be loving, we can be free. And no one can take that from us. That's our birthright. That is our true nature. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And so there's some kind of commonality in the themes of these books. Yes, there's understanding and insight—we call this insight meditation. As you quiet the mind and open the heart, you get to experience the unbearable beauty of life. And you also get the ocean of tears. The war, the racism, the problems with the climate, all kinds of things like that. And they can't be separated. The problem is when you open, you get it all, as said before the break. And that's part of what it means to be a genuine human being, or a wise or a loving human being—to grow your capacity to be present for this human incarnation in its mystery in an open-hearted way.

I felt this very strongly in these last weeks because I was back east. I was back east a lot this year because my twin brother had been quite sick over the last couple of years with myelofibrosis and leukemia—stem cell transplant and a million transfusions and chemotherapy and so forth. And he died a couple of weeks ago.

I was back there with him for quite a bit of the time until the day before he died, where I had to go somewhere else, and it also felt right to leave. We were pretty complete. He ended up being home for the last couple of weeks, but then he was struggling some, so they moved him to the hospital where they could give him IV morphine and help him. For the last night he had his two daughters, and they sat up on either side and held his hand. It was exactly the right thing. He was ready after all he'd gone through. And they were there to hold him. Very, very touching.

He was a kind of adventurer. He was literally a member of the Explorers Club—the people who go to the South Pole and the North Pole and the moon and all those things. Those guys. I asked him if they would allow inner explorers. He said no.

He was a scientist, a biologist who studied the genomes of the great lakes of the world like Baikal and Lake Titicaca in the Andes and Lake Malawi. But as he got closer to death and as we got time to really sit together, it was clear he wasn't that interested in meditation, and I wasn't going to foist that on him—spare your friends and family. But I somehow wanted to communicate with him something of what I knew. And it was especially powerful to me because he is a twin. He's an identical twin. There's a kind of closeness.

So I was sitting there with him in the last days, and I said, "You know, I think I'm going to meditate out loud a little bit so you just kind of know what I'm doing inside." And I didn't quite know what I would experience. But as I sat there, I said, "I'm tuning in as I sit with you"—and he was pretty thin and weak and all the things that happen at the end of a long bout with cancer—"and the first thing I notice as I tune into my body is that it's cold. I feel that coldness all the way in the perineum, in my pelvis and genitals, and then it radiates out." I said, "I feel death in my body."

And we talked about him dying. I said, "You're coming close to death, but as your twin, I also feel it. And I can feel with it, the coldness, I can feel contraction, fear, resistance, all those kinds of things that can accompany the body which doesn't really want to die."

And so I just kind of began to track that and describe it to him. I sat for a bit. And I said, "But then my attention gets drawn further up in my body, not where it's so cold and dead."

And I find myself then drawn to the heart. And I looked at him and I said, I feel so much love for you. We don't talk in this way in our family. I said, but you know, here we are, it's about time. And there was a kind of tenderness in it.

If you've sat with people who are dying, especially those that are close to you, at some point you get to look

in their eyes. And there are things that you can't even say in words that are so tender, and you feel lost, like I'm never going to see this person again in this way. So it's both heartbreak and also this beautiful, deep kind of love or communion.

And we just sat and looked at each other, and I said, this is the next part of my meditation of attention—just to see, to see you, see this person I lived my whole life with. And that I'm not going to see in this form again. Tears and presence. And we sat that way for a bit.

And I said, and now my attention is opening up as it does in meditation. And I feel a sense of space and vastness of just awareness itself, like the sky, which isn't limited to my body or your body, but it's really what we are. We are awareness. What do you think was born into that body of yours, by the way, in the womb? You think you're only made of hamburgers or oatmeal or whatever it is that you grew up on. I mean, you're something more than that. The spirit came into this life and it will leave.

And I said, and now I'm experiencing as if I can look at you and see our whole life past. There we were in the womb together, these little embryos and then these little babies that got born, and there we were together in the crib. I actually had a dream a few days after he died that he was next to me in bed, and it was like being back in the womb or in the crib or something. It was very comforting. He said he's okay, which I was glad about—whether it's true or not, I don't know, but it was a lovely dream.

And I said, there's this vastness, and I see you, and then I see our dance. I see the dance of this particular human incarnation that we're given so much time. And he said to me, you know, one of us has to go first, so I guess it's me.

And I looked at him, and I remembered when he was eight years old. When he was eight years old, I was eight years old. When we were eight years old, we were living in Buffalo. And it was a huge, bitter snowstorm, windy, cold. And we went out to play all wrapped up the way you do in the cold as kids. And I was skinny as a rail and shaking and freezing, and he was much bigger and more robust—he played football. And he was this adventurer.

He looked at me and he said, it's not cold. And he took off his hat. He said, it's not cold. He took off his scarf. Then he took off his jacket. Then he took off his shirt until he was stripped naked to the waist. And he started dancing around. He said, you think it's cold. It's not cold. And it was beautiful. It was some kind of transmission or teaching about his spirit.

So I was sitting there remembering that and seeing all the things that we lived through—our children and marriages and adventures together. And I said, well, this incarnation may be ending, but I'll share a womb with you again anytime. And I said, let's rest in this, let's rest in the vastness and the mystery of it.

Later we talked about what happens when you die, which Frank and I have some disagreements about, but we'll get to that in a little bit.

What was there in this conversation was both the mystery—the mystery of being alive as a human being, the mystery of the vastness and of awareness or consciousness itself. Because when you're near death, the gates between the worlds open. You see in some vaster way. There was a lot of tenderness and also a kind of wedding.

I hope you can hear this because it's so important to understand in our lives that you need to remember your true nature—the undying spirit, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it—and your zip code, basically, that you have a physical body and you have this particular life and incarnation and you have to tend it. And the dance is somehow to hold all those pieces: the coldness and the death and the enormous love and the vast vision that says, here we are going through human incarnation. How is it going for you? Oh, you're going to be dying soon. Well, I'll be following you.

And it was both mysterious and beautiful and tender and tragic—all those things that we know when things are really close to the heart. And of course, the people all around him did what they did. Some were easy and attentive, and some were completely freaked out and frightened and so forth. And that's also the way that it is. People do what they do around death.

I have to say, one of my favorite stories in your book—and I'm actually going to read one story from your book.

It's all right. I'll use it in talks later. Thief, you know. So I'm assessed.

One of my favorite stories is about Jillian, who brought her mother who had dementia home to live with her. Jillian walked into the living room—she had gotten a caregiver for her mother while she was working and publishing, whatever she was doing. She came home and in the living room found her library, all her beloved books including sacred Buddhist texts, scattered across the floor. And her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty old books, I'm going to give them to my dentist."

So you get a little sense of the dementia there. And Jillian was momentarily trapped by her anger. She scolded the attendant: "How could you let this happen?" All that. And the attendant, who wasn't caught up in that drama, said, "Ma'am, today I packed the books up and tomorrow I will unpack them. And if this gives a sense of control to a woman who's lost so much, well then it's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

There's so much tenderness in that reply. It's such a beautiful story. And people will do what they do. Our game is not to try to perfect the world or other people or save them. You'll notice they don't want you to save them, particularly those in your family. "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all," it says in Zen. But your family members are not interested in that. The game is not really to perfect them or even yourself. It's to perfect your love. It's to be able to show up in some way that's genuine and loving for this mystery.

And it's so mysterious. It takes six million grains of pollen to seed one peony. How does that happen? And

there you were, some tiny little one cell—or maybe two little cells came together—and then poof, a new incarnation. How does that happen? So it's so mysterious and beautiful. And there aren't ideals about the way that it's supposed to be as much as there is the practice that we do. And I could feel it sitting with my brother, sitting with a lot of people who've died. You've done that much more than I. What it meant to be able to bring that presence to all those dimensions at the same time.

I liked how you started out talking about all these words that we use—awakening and realization and enlightenment—they all feel very far off. And I liked that you were talking about the emphasis of your book starting from the fruit of practice.

I don't even use this word mindfulness so much anymore. When people ask me what my practice is...

Because you don't want to pay the royalties?

Yeah. Well, mindfulness is the new black, you know. It's suitable for all occasions, it seems. But anyway, what I say my practice is, is intimacy. Really learning to be intimate with myself and with the world. And what you described with your brother is that. It was a beautiful attunement to yourself, but also to him.

And this intimacy was really expressed so beautifully by you. I thought that was lovely.

Life and death are intimate. They're a package deal—you can't pull them apart. In Japanese Zen, there's a beautiful expression: *shoji*. It's usually translated as one word: birth-death. Nothing separating the two except a small hyphen, a thin line. A life that doesn't really include death is only half a life. There's this intimacy that's always present, yet we're constantly trying to pull them apart, to compartmentalize them. But I wonder what it would be like if instead we invited it in—invited death in to see what it had to offer us.

I say that death is not at the end of a long road, at the end of an illness, but in the marrow of every passing moment. She's the secret teacher hiding in plain sight, showing us what matters most.

We have this idea that at the time of our death, we'll do the work then. But to imagine that we will have the strength of body, the emotional stability, the mental clarity at that time of our life to do the work of a lifetime—it's a ridiculous gamble. One of the reasons I wrote the book was that I saw so many people coming to this moment with so much fear and distress and regret. I wanted to encourage us to step into a relationship with death much earlier in our lives.

To give you some background, I was the co-founder of something called the Zen Hospice Project that we started thirty years ago. We didn't really know what we were doing. It just seemed to us that there was this match between people who were cultivating what we could call the listening heart in meditation practice and people who needed to be heard at least once in their lives—people who were dying. We didn't have much more of a plan than that. Really, that was it.

We worked mostly on the streets, with folks who lived in Tenderloin hotels, a section of San Francisco. I

changed a lot of diapers on park benches behind City Hall. Over the course of the years, I've probably sat with a couple of thousand people who died. All kinds of people. People from cultures I didn't understand, speaking languages I didn't know. People with great faith, others who'd sworn off religion years ago.

There was Nguyen, a Vietnamese man who was scared of ghosts. And his roommate Isaiah, an African-American man who was deeply comforted by visits from his dead mother. There they were, sharing a room together. There were people who had intact families and good health insurance. And there were people who lived on the margins of society. People who were clear as bells. Others who couldn't remember their own name.

There was a man I knew who had contracted the HIV virus from a blood transfusion. But the year before, he had disowned his gay son who was diagnosed with HIV. Now they were in twin beds in the same room, being cared for by Agnes—the husband's wife and the son's mother. There was Alex, who got so confused one night he climbed out onto his fire escape and froze to death.

Some of them really opened and blossomed and discovered a kindness they'd always wanted their whole lives. Other people turned toward the wall in withdrawal and depression and never came back again. All of them are my teachers. Anything I have of value to offer came from them.

A few years ago, I was teaching a retreat for doctors and nurses on compassion, and in the middle of it I had a heart attack. I went through surgery and all that. But what was interesting was that for the months after, almost every night I had dreams of the people I'd taken care of. They would come to me in the dreams—sometimes they would just sit with me, other times they'd give me advice, sometimes they'd say thank you. It was a clear lesson about how the relationship continues even after someone has died. Maybe especially so when it's our twin.

A few years ago, Bill Moyers invited me to come back to New York with a bunch of other people to talk about this film he was making about dying in America. I wrote this very salient talk—I felt quite proud of it. I got there and I was on this panel with all these silver-tongued devils, and they took up all the time.

And I never got to deliver my talk. Bill, who I knew from something else, grabbed me and said, "Could you just talk for a few minutes?" On the airplane there, somewhere over Kansas, I had tried to write down a few key things that I thought were really important, and they became the five invitations. What are the five things I've learned from people who are dying that have value?

The first was: don't wait. Don't wait to tell someone you love that you love them.

The second was: welcome everything, push away nothing. Jack and I were just talking a moment ago about this beautiful James Baldwin documentary that's out, *I Am Not Your Negro*. It's a beautiful film. In it he says something really extraordinary: "Not everything that can be faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed unless it's faced." To welcome everything doesn't mean we have to like it all. We just have to be willing to meet it.

The third was: bring your whole self to the experience. We think it's our strength or our expertise that will help others, but often it's—well, I felt for myself—it was the things I was sometimes most ashamed of, the parts of myself I most wanted to hold in some hidden corner of my life, that in fact became the very thing that allowed me to build an empathetic bridge to the other person's experience. So I had to bring it all: my strength and my clarity, but also my fear and my helplessness.

The fourth: find a place of rest in the middle of things. We think we'll find rest when we go on retreats or vacation or when our list gets checked off. My list never gets checked off. So I have to find a way of resting right in the middle of what I'm doing. That's what this practice is all about—helping us to find a place of rest right here, right now.

And the last one was to cultivate don't-know mind. I felt it was important to put something Zen-like in this list. I remember my son saying to me, "What the hell does that mean, Dad?" But to cultivate don't-know mind is to cultivate a mind of wonder, of curiosity, of openness, of receptivity, of readiness. It's not to encourage ignorance. Ignorance isn't just not knowing. Ignorance is misperception—I know something, but it's the wrong thing, and I believe it really strongly.

So those are the five invitations. I found that these were my guides for many years in working with folks who were dying. But then I thought, well, they have a relevance for all of us—for living a life of integrity and meaning and love. I feel very grateful that people let me come up close and personal with death. They really showed me how to live by doing that. I feel very, very grateful to all my teachers, two thousand of them that I had.

So, that's a little something we can start out with. But let's visit a little bit and see what else we want to chat about.

Jack Kornfield: There are a couple of things—a kind of overarching statement and then a question. What you're describing, there are parallels in what I've written about, that the place where you end up, as T.S. Eliot says, after all our journeying and voyaging, will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time, in the *Quartets*. The goal is actually to be where we are in this mystery, but with open heart and clear-eyed in some way.

What I'm hearing, in a much more universal language, is also what's traditionally structured in Buddhist teachings—the Four Noble Truths: there's suffering and its causes, which is our clinging and our resistance and our fear; and the possibility of freedom wherever we are; and the path to that being the willingness to be intimate, present, compassionate. Or I'm hearing the four dimensions of the awakened heart: of love; and compassion when there's pain, but not ending the story with that; of having joy as well; and finally equanimity, or peace.

These fundamental teachings are expressed so immediately and in such a universal way, not as Buddhist teachings—because they're not, really. They're just the way it is in human life. And I think it's part of

what's happening here in the West, that these beautiful teachings and trainings and practices of mindfulness and compassion, empathy and forgiveness, now researched by five thousand papers and studies and neuroscientists, in schools and clinics and businesses—they're getting out there, but not as Buddhist practices. Rather, as trainings that are really our birthright, that are part of our human nature. And your being close to death, in a way, shines that light of presence and attention that reveals them so naturally. So that's one comment to make.

And then I want to ask a question about not being idealistic, about flunking the course, basically. Because I have.

"Yeah, me too."

And how has that been for you?

Well, as I mentioned earlier, I had a heart attack. It wasn't somebody else that was near death. You know, the view from the other side of the sheets is a really different view. And here I was, Mr. Hospice. There was a lot of pressure to do this right. I had people all over the country, all over the world wondering how he's going to do it. I used to think I knew something about dying until I had my own heart attack. Then I realized how little I knew, actually. And I became much more humble. That was a good thing.

"Good for your family, anyway."

I'll tell you a story. I just ran into Eugene on the pathway—Eugene Cash. Some of you know Eugene. He's a dear friend of both of ours. Right after my surgery, I was in the cardiac care unit, intubated. I had this long, several-hour surgery, triple bypass. And I was thinking about how our practice is—when you were guiding us in our practice, you were helping us attend to the body and breath. But sometimes I think we get too fixed on the body and breath. It won't always be there for us. And so we have to open beyond the body and breath.

So I'm in this cardiac care unit and I'm intubated, I can't speak. That means I've got hoses coming out of every orifice. Eugene's there with me and my son. Into the room comes a respiratory therapist and he says, "Let's pull out that tube and see if you can breathe." That's how he introduced himself. I waved like this—I could feel, they had actually damaged my left lung in the surgery, and I could feel my left lung wasn't working. So I wrote on a piece of paper, "I'm scared."

Eugene, very no-nonsense guy, said, "Frank, sense your body."

I tried to sense my body, but I could only feel up to my knees. Then he said, "Find your breath, find your breath." But I couldn't. I couldn't tell the difference between the machine and my own breathing.

In that moment, I remembered one of my other great teachers, Suzuki Roshi. The night before Suzuki Roshi was dying—a great Zen master who turned the wheel of Dharma in America and changed the whole way the Dharma is experienced here—the night before he was dying, he wanted to take a bath. Okasan,

his wife, said, "No, no, no." But he insisted, and so Otohiro, his son, picked up his father and carried him to the tub. As he started to lower him into the warm bath water, Suzuki Roshi became terrified. He was afraid he would drown. Otohiro said to him, "Father, calm yourself. Find your breath, find your body." And gradually, Suzuki Roshi was able to do that.

But in that moment in the cardiac care unit, I thought: if Suzuki Roshi can be scared, I can be scared.

Then I grabbed Eugene by the shirt. We were like this—I pulled him close to me and put my ear right next to his cheek. Somehow he understood that what I needed was to follow the rhythm of his breath. Which I did. He lent me his breath until I could find my own again.

And my son slipped his hand in against my chest. And it was like a conduit from God. There was so much love. And then I could say to the respiratory therapist, okay, okay, now you can take out the tube.

I think we can have idealized notions about practice and our dying and who we think we're supposed to be. What I've learned from other folks who are dying and from my own experiences is that this is all we have. This is who we are—not just this, as Jack said, not just this sinew and bones, but this is who we are. This is what we have to rely on. And we can keep discovering greater and greater dimensions of ourselves that become increasingly more reliable.

About six or seven years ago, I was teaching in front of a big group of people, and then I fell over and passed out. I was unconscious for a pretty long time—a minute, minute and a half. It was pretty long. When I came to, there were like eight doctors all peering down at me who had rushed up. Then I went to get scans and all the kinds of things they do, because the next day something similar happened. Then I started to get pretty serious tremors. I still have a bit of a tremor, but they were much worse then—and numbness and tingling and cold in my body along with all these tremors.

After some tests, I went to see this doctor. I was misdiagnosed. He said, "Well, you have this thing sort of like ALS." It was happening pretty quickly because it had now been a couple or a few weeks. I went with my daughter to this appointment. And he said, "Given how rapid this is happening, what I suspect will happen is that your body will fall apart over these next few months in the way that it is. And with it will come dementia."

Now, I was thinking of a different kind of death. And dementia wasn't on my menu, you know. It scared me also. I went out and told my daughter, who was waiting for me, and she just started to weep. She said, "Daddy, I want you to be here for my children," and all the things—you know, the people that love you the most.

Fortunately, it was a misdiagnosis and it wasn't true. But I too thought, oh, I'd sat in the charnel grounds in the monastery, chanted over bodies, done all the death meditation, sat with people. You know, I'm chill with death, right? Okay. The body doesn't want to die. There's something in it organically that's true. It clings to life.

I had this really interesting experience when I came back from being in the monastery for those years. I disrobed and started to live a modern life. I was driving down the freeway in Massachusetts and a tractor trailer lost a big piece of its tire on the freeway in front of me. One car crashed into it, another—it was really something—and I had to swerve to get around it. Fortunately I wasn't part of that accident, though some people were hurt in terrible ways.

There were two things going on. One part of me, partly because I'd just been in some years of retreat, was extremely spacious and calm. Like, "Oh, interesting. Maybe I'm about to die. Wonder what will happen." Just peaceful witness. And my body grabbed the steering wheel and yanked it this way and said, "Not today, baby." Both of those were happening at the same time.

I talked to Ram Dass about it. He said, "Oh, I flunked the course a lot of times."

But this is part of the reality of being human—that our body has a certain life and it needs to be respected. Our heart and our love have a certain life that needs to be respected. And then, as you sit in quiet silence, the mind open, the heart open, there's also a sense of something bigger and more mysterious that is who you really are—that you're part of this vastness.

As Alice Walker writes—I love this passage—she said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it come to me. Being a part of everything. And I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I ran all around the house because when it happens you just can't miss it."

There's something in us that knows this is true—whether it's walking in the high mountains or making love or listening to an extraordinary piece of music or sitting at the bedside of someone dying or someone being born, which is equally wild. Out of your body or someone else's body—oh, here's a new person. Okay. We touch something, those gates open, and we realize that it's not just our to-do list or the roles that we carry. Somehow we all know this very, very deeply.

And part of the grace of the work that you and I both get to do—in hospice work and in this work of people's practice of opening with intimacy—is to invite that presence in whatever way we can. And to know that it's not an ideal. It's the full picture.

I mean, when I'm dying, I want somebody next to me who knows what the hell they're doing. I want good pain management. I want symptom control. I don't want somebody coming and just chanting over me.

But that won't be enough.

Right, you also want someone to breathe in your ear.

Exactly—I was going to say that. So that won't be enough. The other thing I want is somebody who's comfortable in a territory of meaning, who can help me figure out what the purpose and value of this life has been. I want to explore that with somebody. I need someone who's comfortable in that territory.

But there's a juncture in the dying process where that's not important anymore. Meaning falls away. And we're still talking to Grandma about her favorite piece of music and how she used to like to ride the roller coaster at Coney Island. But Grandma's someplace else now. Grandma's entering into this territory of mystery that you're speaking of. This is the land of unanswerable questions. And in this land, I think, we're all adventurers—like your brother. We bear witness more than anything else, more than provide any kind of answers.

You don't do that? You don't tell them what will happen?

I'm more interested in what they think is going to happen.

Well, he said he was going to become dirt. He's a scientist.

How do you respond to that?

Well, I had the guy who was the head of the California Atheist Association come to die with us at Zen Hospice. I was very proud that he felt we weren't going to push any dogma on him. And I asked him—I ask everybody—what do you think is going to happen after you die? Everybody's got a story. We all have a story. And that story is shaping the way in which we die, and I think also the way in which we live our lives.

So I said to this guy, what's going to happen after you die? He said, "Nothing." And I said, well, what kind of nothing? Like, will you have ears? Will you smell things? "No, you don't have no ears." I said, is it like a dial tone? He said, "No, no, no, no. You're molecules and you mix with all the other molecules in the universe." I said, oh, *that* kind of nothing. That's beautiful.

But then there was another guy. We had this guy, Jackie. He was a thirty-year heroin user. African-American guy. I loved him dearly. And I said, Jackie—you know, he was at Zen Hospice, right?

This guy had come in off the streets. And I said, "So Jackie, here you are at this Buddhist hospice. Do you think you're going to get born again?" And he said, "Yep." I said, "Well, what are you going to come back as?" He said, "Jackie." I said, "Well, why do you want to be Jackie? You could be something else. You could be a king or a queen. In some cultures you can come back as a cow—that's very sacred, you know."

And he said, "I'm not coming back as no goddamn cow. I'm coming back as Jackie."

I said, "How come?"

He said, "Because next time I'm going to get it right."

And now we're having a different conversation. If I had told him what was going to happen, we wouldn't have had that exchange.

I don't know—I mean, I have my own views and beliefs. But I don't hold on too tightly.

There was a woman, a wonderful Christian Scientist, ninety years old, ready for dying. She said to me, "I just want to put my head down in the lap of Jesus." Then her granddaughter came to visit and said, "Grandma, I read a book at this spiritual center in Woodacre. You don't have to worry, because when you die, everybody who's died before you will be there to meet you."

And Grandma became terrified. Her husband Edgar had been beating her most of her life. He had died five years before. The idea of spending eternity with Edgar was not appealing at all. You can't divorce your ex in the afterlife—it's too hard.

So I'm just saying that I don't impose my ideas. I explore with people. I inquire with them and see what their story is. And then we see whether or not that's a helpful story.

On occasion, I do tell people what's going to happen. I did with my brother. I said, "You're a scientist, right? Scientists do experiments. They have a hypothesis. They're open-minded and they learn from it. So you think you're just going to turn into dirt." I said, "It might be so. But it's also possible, based on some potential data for you to consider."

I told him: first of all, the majority of people around the world, across cultures, understand that you're not limited to your body. That's a belief found everywhere. Then there's my own experience—I've had out-of-body experiences in meditation and learned to do that. I've sat with people who are dying, and when they're close to death they go out of their body and see light, or become light, and come back and describe it. There's all the near-death literature. I've led past life regressions in Asia and Europe. People who believe and people who don't—it doesn't matter. If you have a group of thirty or forty people and you do this regression, half of them or more remember some

And it's not like Cleopatra. It's more like being a foot soldier in Crimea or being a farmer somewhere in South America, sometime long ago in Peru. And the people who have those experiences are not necessarily the ones who believed in them beforehand. Then if I progress them forward to what it was like to die in that life, they feel the pain of dying and the loss, and then they feel themselves liberated and free, and there's these states in between.

So I don't know. You have to be open-minded. But I said to my brother, it's possible that as you die, you'll find yourself leaving your body, that you might experience light. And he was also an amateur Egyptologist, so I decided to read him from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, because that was his language. He didn't want the Tibetans. But okay, there's Maat, there's the feather from Maat, and there's the scale, and your soul will be judged in this way. And I read it, and I said, whether you take it literally or metaphorically, there's some way in which there's a kind of reckoning—okay, I've died, wow, what was that one about? Some sense of life review that happens, as people describe.

So I just sort of went over that territory with him, not expecting him to believe it particularly. But I did say, "If it happens, remember, I told you so." You know, we're twins. What can you do? Brothers, right?

Who's going to be there at the time of your dying to say, "I told you so"?

My father used to say, "It can't be too bad—no one's come back to complain." He didn't know about the Buddhists at that point. I don't know. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when somebody asked him what was going to be reborn, said, "Mostly your bad habits." It's not a pretty picture from him.

That said, we were talking about Bly's translation of Kabir's poems: what's found now is found then. And that's what interests me—how do we take this whole exploration and bring it into this very life, this moment of our life? How can we use that to inform how we lead our lives now?

The two questions people inevitably form in one way or another when they're dying are: Am I loved? Did I love well? Those are the two big questions, in one fashion or another, that are asked. And why should we wait until the time of our death to answer that question? Do we need to wait until we die to rest in peace? Or can we find it now? This is what interests me. If what Trungpa was saying is that habit is what's reborn, then let's cultivate habits that bring us to our wholeness and happiness and the four flavors of love.

I think of the phrase "the habits of the heart." Somebody asked my teacher Ajahn Chah, "What is the Dharma?" Because dharma is this multi-meaning word in Sanskrit that means teachings and truth and so forth. And he said, "The Dharma is the heart." This is the way that you live in the world.

And we don't live in isolation in this. For most people, whether they had any religious practice or not in their life, if you ask somebody what's most important to them, inevitably they would say their relationships, in one fashion or another. It could be their relationship with nature, their relationship with their family. We don't do this life alone. We can't do it alone.

We have a mutual friend, Bernie Glassman, a great Zen teacher. He was talking in Germany about Avalokiteshvara, this Tibetan form of Buddha, this deity depicted sometimes as having a thousand arms. And in each hand, in some depictions, there's an ear to hear the cries of the world, and a thousand arms to respond. Bernie was talking about this in Germany, and a man raised his hand. He said, "It's a very nice metaphor. It's beautiful, but I have only two arms." And Bernie said, "I'm sorry, you're mistaken."

And the man said, no, I'm quite sure I have just two arms. And Bernie said, I don't think so. I don't think so.

And then he had everybody in the room raise both their arms. Go ahead, do it. Just go ahead. Look around. This is Avalokiteshvara. This is our life.

We can't do this alone. It's a ludicrous idea to think that we die alone, that we practice alone, that this sitting practice we do is just for our own benefit. We're always wrapped up, tangled up in everything else. And that often is what shows itself in the time of dying.

Ordinary people, people like you and I, many people who have no spiritual practice, regularly find themselves—as you're describing to your brother—feeling a kind of expansiveness, becoming something

more than the small separate self they had taken themselves to be. And to really trust that in the dying process, particularly the process that comes with long-term illness, is conducive to this. It's helpful to this.

And it's a process of stripping away. The ways in which we've defined ourselves are either stripped away by illness or gracefully given up, but they all go. They all go. And then we find, often, something much more fundamental, much more reliable than all of our constructions.

When I write in this new book about the different dimensions of freedom—the freedom to love, the freedom to forgive, the freedom to start over, the freedom to be yourself, and also the freedom beyond yourself—it's also true, as you're saying and as Martin Luther King would say, that my freedom is bound up in your freedom, that we can't separate them.

I think about a men's retreat I led here with Robert Hall, one of my beloved friends and dharma teachers. In the circle one night we were sharing stories, and there was a fellow on the retreat who had a radio show in Los Angeles on Sunday nights. It was a blues radio show—I don't know, maybe KPFK or one of those stations. He said he had a big following of people who were in prison. Lots of incarcerated people liked to listen to that show.

One day he got a letter from somebody who was serving a life sentence or a long term in prison, asking would he play some early blues masters like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Muddy Waters and Mississippi John Hurt—some of the classics. And the letter was signed John Huntsman, or whatever his name was.

A couple of Sundays later, the DJ said on air, "I received a letter from this gentleman, John Huntsman, who's obviously an aficionado of the blues and knows who the great masters are, and I'm pleased to be able to play these next songs for you."

Then a couple weeks later he got another letter from John Huntsman. It said he was so grateful for the show, and then this line: "That's the first time in my life I can remember hearing my name said with respect."

There's something in this—I've seen it in working with gang kids, and I know you know it at the bedside. It doesn't take forever. It takes a moment to see somebody with the eyes of love and with that vastness, to see the dignity and inviolable spirit that was born in them, to see something with that kind of respect, to really see the Buddha nature in each person. And that kind of intimacy can change everything, even in a moment.

There was a man who came to the hospice on compassionate release from prison. He had stabbed his sister seventeen times. He was in prison for manslaughter. I didn't tell our volunteers this. He came to stay with us. And he wouldn't let anybody help him. Just wouldn't.

But we just treated him with kindness.

One day we were in the backyard smoking cigarettes, and he said, "I let the girls help me today." The girls

were the nurses. I said, "Well, what did you let them do?" "I let them get me in the shower." Not just put him in the shower—he actually got undressed in the shower with their help.

Gradually over time, just by treating him with kindness, just by holding up a mirror to his basic human goodness, he started to soften. Really soften.

And then he did a funny thing. I worked at Zen Hospice for twenty years. The only one who ever threw me a birthday party was this guy. He threw me a surprise party, and he saved his social security check. He actually wanted to get a stripper to jump out of a cake.

And?

The nurses persuaded him that just a regular cake would be okay.

But he did this all himself. He did it all himself. I walked into the room, and there he was with the volunteers, and he was so happy that he could give something.

Now this man, he'd been in institutions all his life.

He'd been in juvie, he'd been through prisons—he started out in orphanages. But he discovered in himself this basic human kindness that he couldn't show before in his life. Had he shown it, he might have been hurt or even killed. There was no room for this gentleness to be shown.

So this happens in the dying process. Whatever has been hidden in us oftentimes comes to the surface. Sometimes it's our ugliness that comes, but sometimes it's our beauty. In his case it was this beauty. But the thing is to keep seeing the whole human being that's there—even if, as Mother Teresa would say, he's in a distressing disguise. See the whole human being, no matter what they are.

These days we're talking about people with confusion, and a lot of our parents... The Alzheimer's epidemic is massive. We are totally unprepared. One in ten of us at sixty-five or over are going to have Alzheimer's. Thirty-two percent of us over eighty are going to have Alzheimer's. The numbers are growing fast. It's dwarfed the AIDS epidemic. But there's a whole human being there.

My Aunt Mimi had Alzheimer's, and I would go to see her, and she couldn't remember who I was. I'd known her all my life. She'd never been married, and I said, "Mimi, you never had a beau? You never had a sweetheart?" This is a woman who was calling me by different names, throwing her dress over her head. And when I asked if maybe she never had a sweetheart, she sat up in her chair like this, folded her arms, and said, "Some questions are too personal to ask."

I really got it. I really respected her, because there's a whole human being there. Even if they can't speak back to us in language we understand and we get confused—that's what happens for us. When we're around other people, we get confused. Other people are confused. But there's always a whole human being there, and we can always hold a mirror to that, to the wholeness in them.

If we're companioning someone who's sick or someone in our family who might be dying, that's the most important thing—just to hold a mirror up to them, to show them. And let their eyes, which are the clearest mirrors I've ever looked into, show you yourself. I've never looked into a mirror that's clearer than the eyes of someone who's dying. They've shown me all my holding and my resistance, all of it. And they also showed me something else—this kind of what I call undying love. That's there too.

But I don't have a fixed... I mean, I'm not romantic about dying. I'm not. It's the hardest work we will ever do. And it's beautiful, and it's horrible, and as Jack said, it's tragic, and it's transformative. But most of all, it's ordinary. It's normal. All of us will go through this. Nobody gets out alive.

We're in the soup together. We're in the boat together. When we really get it, we don't make dying something that happens later. Later gives us this comfortable distance from it. If we really see this is actually in the very nature of my being right now, then I think we're kinder to each other. We don't hold on so tightly to our ideas or notions of ourselves, or our beliefs. We let go. It engenders this kind of kindness and letting go, and an appreciation of one another.

When we know how precarious this life actually is, then we also understand how precious it is. And then we don't want to waste a moment. Then we want to jump in with both feet. Tell the people we love that we love them.

When you talk about Alzheimer's, I remember that story in our dear friend Rachel Remen's first book about a physician whose father had Alzheimer's severely enough that for at least five or six years the man was unable to speak at all. He gradually lost comprehension, and then he lost his language. There were caregivers, and the dad was there. And one morning he was sitting in his chair and he fell off—he was having a heart attack. His heart was in tremendous pain. Being a physician, the son could see that, and he was about to call 911. But the father lifted his head. He hadn't spoken for six years. And he said, "Don't call 911. It's a heart attack. I'm dying. Tell your mother I love her. And I love you." And that's it. And where those words came from—from someone who couldn't speak, whose brain was full of all the tangles of Alzheimer's—because we're not just this body. We are not.

It's interesting with Alzheimer's, because when people have a difficult time articulating their experience, we often think that there's nobody home. We're really identified with our brains. We're not so identified with our spleens. If our spleens don't work, it's okay. But if our brain doesn't work, then we think we're not there. It's just such a small story to live in. Such a small story. We are so much more than that.

And it becomes so clear and evident in the dying process. Ordinary people, regular people who had no spiritual practice in their life, regularly discover in themselves the resources, the compassion, the capacity to meet the impossible in extraordinary ways.

And this is really—I thank you for what you're saying—sort of winding up. It's both the gift of what you've written and of all your life work at Zen Hospice and so forth. And it's also the gift of the practice that we

do together, that we share. Whether you use the word mindfulness or not, or use intimacy, as Zen Master Dogen said: to become enlightened is to become intimate with life.

So I want to read you a story in your honor as a way to close, unless there's something else you want to add before I do.

No, go ahead.

No, I mean, I was thinking of other things, but we could do this for days. At some point we have to go home.

A Sufi master known for his open-mindedness died in the fullness of time and found himself outside the gates of heaven. The attending angel said, "Go no further, O mortal, until you have proven your worthiness to enter this paradise." The master responded, "Just a minute. First, can you prove that this is really heaven and not just the wishful fantasy of my disordered mind undergoing death?" Before the angel could reply, a voice from inside the gate shouted, "Let him in—he's one of us."

Yeah, you do have something, okay.

Amongst some Zen monks, there's a tradition that on the day of your death you write a poem—a death poem—that tells maybe the essential truth of your life. And if you don't die that day, it doesn't count. You have to write a new one. But anyway, I was in the hospice one day reading this book of death poems, and there was with me a woman who had lived on the margins of society. She asked me about what I was reading, and I told her. She said, "I want to write one of those." I said, "Okay, good, you should do that." She said, "Well, what's the form?" I said, "Don't worry, just write it." This is a woman we would have passed by on the street.

Some hours later, she called me up to her room. She came upstairs. She said, "Frank, I've written my death poem. And when I die, I want you to pin it to my clothing, and I want to be cremated with it." I said, "Okay, we can do that." And she said, "But I want you to learn it by heart."

She didn't say memorize it. She said, I want you to learn it by heart. And she said, I want to know that it lives in your soul.

I feel so lucky I had these people in my life.

You want to hear her poem?

Don't just stand there with your hair turning gray.
Soon enough the seas will sink your little island.
So while there is still the illusion of time,
set out for some other shore.
No sense packing a bag.

You won't be able to lift it into your boat.
Give away all of your collections.
Take only new seeds and an old stick.
Send out some prayers on the wind before you sail.
Don't be afraid.
Someone knows you're coming.
An extra fish has been salted.

"Don't just stand there with your hair turning gray. Soon enough the seas will sink your little island. So while there is still the illusion of time"—that's a great line—"set out for some other shore." In other words, practice now.

"No sense packing a bag. You won't be able to lift it into your boat." Nobody I was with who was dying ever said, "I wish I'd gotten that second Mercedes."

She said, "Take only new seeds and an old stick." You know that image of farmers or gardeners putting a stick in the ground and then a seed, a stick in the ground and a seed? It means it's not a full stop.

Then she says, "Send out some prayers on the wind before you sail." Don't think you can do this by yourself. Get some help. But don't be afraid. In her view, someone knows you're coming. An extra fish has been salted.

That was her death poem. Her name was Sono, and thank you, Sono. I appreciate you honoring me with that poem. Thank you, my friend.

Well, let's just sit for a minute and let this rest in the heart.

Thank you again for coming. Please feel free to come back, walk the land, do a retreat—anything that nourishes your spirit, quiets your mind, tends your heart. You are now part of this community just by virtue of being here.

And tend each day with love.

Thank you.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.