The Garden of the Heart

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 59:58

Please let yourself get settled in a way that's comfortable and listen. Listening to teachings is a kind of reflection or a meditation practice. There's no quiz at the end, no exam—you've already passed. Rather, you let yourself listen and sense what's true in your own heart, what resonates for you, what reminds you of something of value. And the other things that don't resonate, just let them go by, or put them on the shelf, or whatever you do with them. You take it in as a kind of practice. And the practice is really the practice of a deeper listening—not just to these words or teachings, but looking into your own heart and your own mind. So sit comfortably.

This evening, especially since the signs of spring are here—in California, the plum blossoms are out in many places. And although we need rain, please, whoever's up there, the rain gods—the sense of spring, which comes early in California, is a really beautiful one. You can see the light turning. And so I want to talk about our practice of mindfulness, compassion, meditation, these things, as a gardening practice, as a gardening of the heart.

This has been a difficult week in the news. There have been a lot of them, but this is one of them, with the school shooting, with the failure to solve any of the problems of immigration for the Dreamers or other people. And as most of you are aware, this is President's Day. I think about going to the Lincoln Memorial, which is one of my favorite places in Washington, and it calls itself a temple. It says, "In this great temple are the words and the memory of this man." It's like a Greek temple. And there, carved in the stone, are the words after the Civil War, which was such a horrendous trauma for the entire country: "With malice toward none and charity toward all." That is presidential leadership. That is an expression of what it means to bring people together. Like Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

There is in our history—and I feel it in our bones, in our consciousness—the understanding of what wise leadership looks like. And sometimes we get it, and sometimes we don't, and often it's kind of mixed. I'm not going to presume the politics of everyone in this room. People have all different kinds of political views. But what I do know is that amidst gun violence, amidst continuing warfare and racism and the kind of sufferings that we see in the world, there are also, even during the course of this evening talk, a billion acts of kindness that don't get featured in the news.

I remember when I was doing some peace work in Palestine and Israel some years ago, what struck me was how many groups there were. I met with a number of them: the Gandhian peace group, a nonviolent peace group that was growing in Palestine, the Former Combatants for Peace, the Bereaved Mothers, the

Sulha that was bringing together teenagers from Palestine and Israel. There were hundreds of amazing groups doing things that you never hear about. All you hear about is if somebody throws a hand grenade or some terrorist attack or someone getting shot. The news is kind of a race to the bottom of the brain stem, basically. Let's try and scare people, and then they'll be frightened and they'll vote for us. It's more or less how politics seems to work.

But it's not what President's Day celebrates. I think we have it combining Lincoln and Washington—from my childhood, we used to have separate President's Days, remember. It is really a celebration of human possibility. And for us, no matter what happens outside, that is what we have to carry as a vision and a possibility in our hearts.

Now here's the paradox. As human beings, we are made of stars and we're made of mud. And we carry all of these possibilities within us. Zen Master Suzuki Roshi said, "You're perfect just as you are. And there is still room for improvement." Right? Part of what we need to understand is how to cherish ourselves and how to be real with ourselves and life as it is. And at the same time, also understand in this paradoxical way that there are still greater possibilities for each of us and for the collective—of compassion, connection, understanding, and so forth. And we all know this.

In Buddhist language, there's talk of sudden and gradual enlightenment. Perhaps we'll get to enlightenment tonight. Perhaps we won't. But let's just call it sudden and gradual awakening. And we've all had it, actually—walking in the mountains, or entering a great cathedral, or hearing an extraordinary piece of music, or making love, or being with someone as they're giving birth, or giving birth yourself, that mystery. Or sitting at the bedside of someone as they die, and the spirit leaves the body, and the gates between the worlds open up and you wonder: What is this human incarnation that lasts for a time and then is gone, just like that? Or you're standing by the Grand Canyon, or you've taken some sacred medicine. There are a hundred ways that we've touched this—where we step out of the small sense of self, what's called the body of fear, the separateness, and feel ourselves truthfully to be part of something so much greater, which is the energy that gave life to us and is the turning of the galaxies and the stars, because that's what we are. We come from this.

And yes, we have to tend this separateness. As Ram Dass likes to say, you have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number. There's some kind of paradox that you have to work with. But there's also a timeless reality, the ever-present eternal in which we live. And the question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. What does it mean to live in mystery rather than just have your list and check off the to-do things—things you have to shop and buy or complete or turn in or send or get? Those are all fine things. But if that's all that makes up our life, something profound is missing, something that nourishes us.

So we all know this somehow. And in some way, entering a spiritual practice of meditation and mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion practice—these are really gateways to open us to that which is

bigger than ourselves. Our connection with all life, our sense of that mystery that we can rest in, of that which is timeless.

It's a beautiful thing to watch when I go up to visit the two-month retreat, or even a week-long or ten-day retreat—people get younger. We talk about it as the Vipassana facelift. By the end of ten days or so, people come in and they're tired and haggard. They did a lot in order to make their week or ten days free. And then you start to see their brows clear and their eyes grow brighter. They're walking around and they take time to look at the flowers and smell the spring air. It's as if their vitality and their beauty and their youth starts to shine again, because they've stopped and slowed down and tended themselves with loving awareness, their own body and breath. And in doing so, they've opened themselves to these other dimensions, which is what we are. Anything important or good that we do has to be connected with what we are. You could call it love or mystery or consciousness, interbeing. It's a beautiful thing.

And so when we come and sit in meditation, it isn't so much to have a good meditation, because you get everything in there. That's what happens. You sit down and you get your own mind. As I like to joke, borrowing from my friend Anne Lamott, she says, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone." So you come with other people, right? You get it all. But the point isn't the particular experience. The point is to get bigger than being caught in those things that come—your fears and longings and hopes and all of those things—so that you become the witnessing of it, the place of loving awareness, of compassion that says, "Yes, this, and even more." You open yourself so that you can live with love for yourself and others. Because in the end, what matters?

So there's the sudden awakening. But the other image that's used is gradual awakening. And here you sit, and there's the monkey mind. Some of you may have noticed that, or the tension in your body, or all the stories that get told, or all those other kinds of things that arise. And the question is, here we are in this human incarnation—I don't know how you got in there, but you're here—and you're sitting here with it. How do you respond to all this stuff?

A story from the early days of the Buddha's teaching: He went out with his alms bowl and approached an area owned by a wealthy Brahmin that was being plowed in the spring plowing. The wealthy Brahmin was distributing food to all the workers. When he saw the Buddha come with his alms bowl, he said, "Ah, monk, I plow and sow and work, and having plowed and sown, then I eat. Why don't you likewise plow and sow, and having plowed and sowed, eat?" He was challenging him—like, come on, you're a mendicant, get with the program and do something worthwhile.

And the Buddha says, I also, Brahman, plow and sow, and having done so, I eat. And the Brahman says, you claim yourself a plowman, but I see no plow. Tell me, what kind of plowing is it you do?

And the Buddha replies: Trust or faith is the seed. Compassion, the rain. Wakefulness is my plow and yoke. Conscience, my guide. And my mind is the harness. Clarity is the plow blade, and well-guarded in action and speech, I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen, drawing the plow

steadily toward freedom of heart—that which can never be regretted.

He offers this little poem in response. And this bears the fruit of liberation. Then the Brahman says, "Ah, then let the venerable monk eat. You are indeed a plowman." Somehow he convinces him.

Now there's an interesting end to this story, because the Brahmin takes a pitcher of milk rice to pour into the alms bowl of the Buddha. And as it pours into the bowl, it hisses with steam and won't stay in the bowl. Of course these stories are both literal stories and metaphors—they're mythological stories. And so you can listen to them in a different way. Why would it hiss and steam? If any of you have ever had the joy of being in a field that's been plowed and touching the plow blade after it's cut a long furrow through the earth, you know it gets very hot. The iron gets really hot. So here's the Buddha's alms bowl. You want to give me something? Let me show you something. Pour in the milk rice. The plow is still hot from the inner work that I've done.

That's the story. And it's a beautiful one because, following Suzuki Roshi—yes, you're perfect the way you are and there's still room for improvement—it really speaks about the seeds that we plant. Having tended them with wise effort as the oxen and the rain of compassion, beautiful fruit will come: the fruit of freedom of heart, the fruit of well-being.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh's way of describing it. Your mind is like a piece of earth planted with many different kinds of seeds. Sometimes he talks about it as storehouse consciousness, with all the different possibilities, the archetypal seeds within it. In this piece of earth with different seeds, there are seeds of joy, of peace, of mindfulness, understanding, and love. There are seeds of craving, of anger, of fear, hate, and forgetfulness. The healthy seeds and the unhealthy seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind and heart. The quality of your life depends on the seeds that you water. If you plant tomato seeds in your garden, tomatoes will grow. Just so, if you water a seed of peace in your heart and mind, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you become happy. When the seed of anger is watered, you become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.

This is really an instruction that's gone down now for 2,600 years, from the Buddha's image to the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh—what it means to begin to tend the garden of our own heart and our own life. Because nobody else can tend it for you, as you've probably noticed. They try online, but it just doesn't work.

Now what happens when you tend the garden of the heart—when you look into what seeds you are watering, what you are planting—is that as you begin to practice what's called appamada, or presence, not being lost, when you become more present, first of all, things start to change in a beautiful way. Modern neuroscience talks about how even in six or eight weeks of training the mind in meditation and the heart, there are measurable changes in the telomeres at the caps on the ends of chromosomes, epigenetic changes, changes in brain structure, and so forth.

But basically what happens is that you become present for your experience and you relate to it in a different way. You don't just get lost in it. When anger comes, you don't just water the anger and get lost in it. When longing comes, you don't just follow that story. Instead, there grows a capacity for spaciousness and perspective and some peacefulness.

You begin to water the seeds of peace and presence and mindfulness as you do, step by step.

And step by step, in this part of the teaching—the gradual teaching—is the game.

My beloved friend and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, was nominated for the Nobel Prize a whole number of different times. Even though he was a scholar who spoke fifteen languages, after the Cambodian Khmer Rouge genocide, he led peace marches—peace walks really—from all the refugee camps on the Thai border, which held hundreds of thousands, maybe a million people. He said, "You can't go back to your villages where the temples were burned and all the intellectuals were killed and almost a quarter of the population died. You can't go back unless you reclaim the land with your own love and your heart."

And so he would lead streams of a thousand people in a bus or the back of a truck, with someone beating a drum and someone ringing a bell, singing the chant of loving-kindness: "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law." And they would recite it over and over and walk back to their villages, reclaiming the land through killing fields, until they felt that they could again plant the seeds of love in ground that had grown so barren.

This is the game—to make our life beautiful. You set a direction. You set the intention of your heart, which is the seeds of compassion, of wakefulness, of being present, of mindfulness. You plant those seeds, and then those seeds have a certain power to grow if you dedicate yourself to them.

But the other thing that happens—and anyone who's ever gardened knows this—is that obstacles will arise. You know how it works, right? There are insects, there is drought, there are weeds that try to take it over. There's compacted soil with no aeration. I don't need to take you by the hand to the local nursery, but they would read you the litany of things you have to tend to make the garden really blossom and bloom.

And this is true in any enterprise we undertake. You know it in parenting, in love relations, in business. You plant this seed—you say, "I'm going to start a business." Let's say your business is your garden. And then you hit the obstacles. Not enough capital. A key employee quits. The market changes. Interest rates rise. Competition becomes stiffer. The supplier gets bought up. All this stuff happens. Anybody who's a business person knows this. You set your direction, you plant your seeds, and then you tend the obstacles, and you keep going.

In parenting, first they just want to put everything in their mouth, right? And hit each other with blocks. And then they fall off their bicycles and have injuries. And then you have to socialize them to play with

each other. And then they have to go through middle school. Oh my God. There's puberty and teenage angst and then sexuality and cars and alcohol and drugs and independence. It's rough, right? For everybody. It's also totally wonderful—I just couldn't be happier being a parent. And yet, there's obstacles.

Social change—the same kind of thing. You look around and you say, this is crazy. We're solving our world problems with war. In kindergarten, when kids hit each other with blocks, you say, "Use your words," right? Why couldn't that go up a little bit to the adult level? And there's racism, which is insane. Let's see, what color are you? You're brown, you're pink—I mean, give me a break.

It makes no sense. There are children starving today while grain elevators overflow with more food than we know what to do with. And it's not complicated—just ten percent of what we spend globally on military weapons (and we are the great military weapons supplier of the planet) would feed every hungry woman and child and man on this earth. What are we doing?

So you say, all right, we have to do something about it. But when you try to engage in social change, what do you encounter? Political obstacles, doubts, financial problems, squabbles between people. All the best activists fight with each other at certain times—not all of them, but you know how it goes, right? Because they're activists in there, passionate and driven.

So you have to meet the obstacles in love. It's the same as in relationships. You seem compatible at first. You fall in love and it's just great. And then that little disappointment starts to creep in, the shadow side, because you imagined them to be a certain way, and then it turns out they're messier or more irritable or anxious or judging or controlling or addicted or whatever it is. And oh my God, I thought you were this person, but I didn't realize I was getting the whole catastrophe.

And back to social change—let's talk about gun control for a moment. Being a country with more guns per capita than any other country in the world, there has to be something sensible. And I think about the children, because I actually believe that what's happening now with the young people from Florida may—may—be a game changer. The margins are the place where real life lives, not in the center of the consciousness of the country, but among the disenfranchised and the children and the elders and the people who've been kept out. They're the ones who actually still carry the possibility and the vision.

A poem from my friend Jane Hirshfield, a great poet in Mill Valley. She writes: "The dead do not want us dead. Such petty errors are left for the living. Nor do they want our mourning. No gift to them, not rage, not weeping. Return one of them, any one of them, to the earth and look—such foolish skipping, such telling of bad jokes, such feasting. Even a cucumber, even a single sesame seed, a feast."

We have to treasure life and the life of our children more than our guns. We have to treasure this earth in ways that we haven't before. And yes, there are obstacles. That doesn't mean we stop doing whatever we think is really right.

So there we are—obstacles that come. And guess what? Your spiritual practice is basically a practice of, as

you garden, working with the obstacles.

The first question is: What are you going to devote yourself to? What are the seeds that you want to plant? If somebody asked you this year, or this decade—would it be seeds of kindness? Would it be a peaceful heart? Would it be seeds of mindfulness? Seeds of compassion and care for yourself? Seeds of compassion and care for others around the world? What are the seeds you would plant? Seeds of love? What will you devote yourself to?

And then, as you begin to meditate—which is like training wheels for living with some consciousness—your body tension and the untamed mind and the unfinished business of the heart and the grief that you carry, the ocean of tears that make up human life, because you're a human being and you carry a certain measure of the sorrows of the world, and the radiance of your heart—all these things will arise. And what do you do with them?

"Just as the water jar is filled drop by drop, so let those who are wise fill themselves moment by moment with goodness." This is from the Buddha. And the goodness is: no matter what arises, can you meet it with compassion? No matter what arises, can you become spacious and peaceful, not so lost and caught up and reactive? Not because you're supposed to, not because it's a grim duty, but because it's actually an invitation to return to your own Buddha nature, to who you really are.

What's important somehow in this is to stay connected with the seeds that you plant. "As a farmer channels water to their land, so the wise ones direct their own heart and mind."

Again, from the text of the Buddha.

This last week I went to a lecture at LMU, Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, given by a friend and a really wonderful man named Father Greg Boyle. He's written a couple of bestsellers, and I can't commend his books to you enough. *Tattoos on the Heart* is the first of them, if you haven't read it. He's the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, and for thirty-some years now he's been working with kids coming out of gangs. They have Homeboy Bakery and Homeboy Cafe; they have all kinds of services for the city removing tagging and graffiti; they've got all kinds of businesses. But mostly what his work is, is to tend the soul and the spirit of these young men and young women who in many cases don't really have a family, or don't have a safe place to live. And so they join a gang because that's what's there. But they also know that it's tremendously destructive. He talks about it beautifully in his book, and I really, really recommend it to you.

Part of what he does is keep notes of the kind of strange malaprops and language that some of his homies like to use. For example, one of the young guys who'd been working with him for a while—he sends them out to talk about Homeboy Industries—came in one day and said, "I'm really learning how to do public speaking. You know, you have to be self-defecating." And Father Greg said, "Oh, that's something I've been meaning to practice."

He describes one day after working for a long time with a whole group of young men who'd come in tattooed, trying to figure out whether they would get out of the gangs or not. Some of them come and go, and it takes four or five, six, eight different times before they really can land at Homeboys. He said, "After a long day, another father and I finally went upstairs. We were reading the paper and just having a quiet time and a cup of tea. And there's loud, insistent knocking on the door. We kind of know who it is—it's this very insistent person who's homeless and difficult and comes around often needing stuff." And it's like, okay, after a day. Finally the other father gets up and says, "All right, I'll answer it." He's there for like twenty minutes and then he comes back. Father Greg looks up and says, "So who was that?" He said, "It was Jesus in his least recognizable form."

You've got to have humor about this for it to work.

I'll read you one part from this book, because at all of the talks that he gives—and now he goes around the country talking about really the redemption that's possible for these young people—if you go there, it's quite extraordinary. He says, "I always bring a couple of homies with me to talk. They get up and they tell their story."

He said, "So we were flying, a long flight, and I took a couple of homies who were from different gangs. I like to mix them up. One of them worked at the bakery, and the other one worked in their store, their shop that sells Homeboy stuff. They got to the airport. They'd never flown. They were terrified. And so we're looking out the window and two of the flight attendants are going up the steps with cups of Starbucks coffee. And I said, 'Well, must be pretty soon it'll be time to take off because they're trying to sober up the pilot.'" He said, "I know that wasn't fair to say to these guys, but anyway—" You've got to mess with him sometimes.

And he says, "All right, it's a thousand people, psychologists and social workers in this major city, and I want you to tell your stories first, and then I'll talk about how I work."

So they get there, Mario and Bobby, and they were both nervous. Their accounts moved people very deeply because their stories were filled with violence, abandonment, abuse, torture, homelessness of every kind. Honest to God, if their stories had been flames, you'd have to keep your distance. Otherwise, you'd get scorched. This is really the work he's thrown himself into.

So they spoke before me. And then before I presented, because I wanted to include them, I asked if anyone there had any questions for these guys. They were both nervous. Once things quieted down, a woman raised her hand. She had a question for Mario, and he started to quake, like, "How do I do this?"

"Yes," he said.

She said, "You're a father. You've been at Homeboys for eight years or nine years. Your son and daughter are starting to reach their teenage years. What wisdom do you impart to them?"

And his sobbing was now more pronounced. The woman was silent. No one said anything, just as you're being silent now. She stood up again. Now it was her turn to cry. And she pointed at him, and her voice, quite certain through her tears, said, "Mario, why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you? You are gentle. You are kind." He was known as being a gentleman at Homeboys. "You are loving. You are wise." She planted herself firmly. "I hope your kids turn out like you."

And there wasn't much of a pause before all one thousand attendees stood up and began to clap. The ovation seemed to have no end. All Mario could do was hold his face in his hands, overwhelmed with emotion.

What Father Greg has done is to tend the seeds of goodness in these young people that come to see him. And he does it over and over. And if they fail, he says, "Then come back when you're ready to try again."

And this is what our human life is about—to direct ourselves towards something that has some nobility to it, that's honorable and moving to our own heart and beautiful. To plant those seeds and stay connected with them. Now the great thing is that you have good seeds to plant. That is born in you. And as Henry David Thoreau says, "Though I do not believe a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

And you have in you the seeds of great compassion. You have in you the seeds of wisdom, the seeds of kinship with life, of care for others. And meditation then isn't to make some special experience because you sit and everything happens. It's to learn how to tend this garden of your own humanity—to water the seeds of kindness, to water the seeds of presence, to water the seeds of attention and care, to water those seeds that are the most beautiful in your own heart.

As the Buddha taught, "As the bee gathers nectar and perfume from the flower without marring its beauty, so let the wise one move through this world, harming none and bringing blessings to all." When you tend the seeds in your garden and the flowers and the fruits and the vegetables bloom, you become like that image of the bee tending what's beautiful, bringing forth good in yourself and those around you, what you value, without harm.

Now here's another really important thing to keep in mind for spiritual practice. The idea is not to make a perfect garden—you know, one of those photos in House and Garden, the coolest garden in Marin County or something like that. It's sort of like all the photos on the covers of magazines of models, the most handsome or beautiful human being you've ever seen, taken in the best light and then touched up. Nobody looks like that. You know that's true. And no garden looks like that except on that day when everything's taken out and they get the photographers in the right light on a spring day at the best angle. They don't show you the compost pile and the weeds.

We have these ideas of how it should be. I remember this cartoon of two little fish swimming in the water. One says to the other, "I want the whole thing—the glass bowl, the little white castle, the blue pebbles." We

have these ideas. They're crazy, these notions about how it should be. Instead of trying to make an ideal of your life—which you've already failed at. You know that.

We all have. Let's be serious about it. As Zen Master Ryokan said, "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change." So here you are.

The idea isn't to make a perfect garden, but to take your perfectly human circumstance—your emotions, your thoughts, your body, for better and for worse, and bodies are always for better and for worse. To take your relationships, oh my God. And your family. Remember, Buddha and Jesus had trouble when they went back to their families too, so just keep that in mind. To take your perfectly human circumstance and use that for wakefulness and compassion and steadiness and letting go and learning to trust. There's no other place to do it. No other way to do it.

Alan Chadwick was a famous gardener at UC Santa Cruz, one of the founders of the modern environmental movement. He gardened by growing soil to grow plants, and what he meant by soil was different from the earth's surface that you or I usually mean. I think he meant the power in the universe that could be concentrated in a garden to capture cosmic magic. Chadwick grew soil and planted seeds based on relationships that existed between the earth, its moon, the sun, the other planets, the weather, the way doves in the area coo, the mist in the trees, and everything you could imagine. When winter was bleak, he'd sing about the energies underneath the surface of the earth: "Underneath, the seeds are full of life. This very moment, the seeds are waking up. They're pushing up to the sun. The doves are singing, coo, coo, life."

Once, Professor Chadwick took his class to a junkyard lot full of rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, and lots of abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. The owner said, "Sure, but you're crazy—that soil is dead." The garden later became famous for its extraordinarily delicious vegetables and gorgeous flowers.

This is the tending that you can do in your own life, moment by moment, person by person. And it's not about being idealistic. As my teacher in the monastery would say on a super hot, sweltering day, or a freezing cold day, or a day when we got very little food in our alms bowl, "Ah, conditions are perfect for awakening." They are.

Now, you don't want to try so hard. It's not about striving. It's really about tending. You don't pull the leaves of the flower open for it to blossom. You water it. You tend it. You let the sun shine on it.

Lauren Slater writes: "Especially in this time of managed care, more emphasis seems to be placed upon medication and the quick amelioration of symptoms, short-term work, and profit—privatized profit-making clinics—than upon the lovely and mysterious alchemy that comprises the healing cords between and within people, the cords that soothe our terrors and help us to be whole." This is true in medicine. There's something that needs to be tended in addition to the body that we know about. And it's

true in our relationships. It's true in the society in which we live.

So it's not about making this some kind of grim duty. Actually, it's an act of love. And that's kind of the game. In the end, if your spiritual practice isn't an act of love, it's somehow gone down the wrong track. It's planted the wrong garden.

So you get comfortable with your life. This is what you got.

You can change where you live and so forth. But the big change that needs to be tended is really the change in the heart. Because wherever you go, there will be people who are difficult. You know they're waiting for you, right? And yet, the teachings are an invitation to freedom of heart. The Dharma is an invitation to freedom. It's immediate, here and now, open-handed, offered to all—a freedom that can be found only and just where you are.

Now it's also true, as you sit, as you practice, that you can't measure it very well. How am I doing? Some days you think you're doing splendidly, and then something happens and you feel like you're the great spiritual failure. And then you tell stories about it. But it's more like being on a boat on the ocean. If you're on a river, you watch the shore go by, but if you're out on the ocean, you actually can't tell exactly where you are. And there is no spiritual GPS—I'm sorry to tell you about this. Instead, what you get to do wherever you are is tend your garden, plant the beautiful seeds.

This from Wendell Berry, a great poet and environmentalist. He writes: "So my friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the world. Work out of love for nothing. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. And go with your love to the fields and lie down in the shade and rest your head." Plant sequoias—you know, that take a thousand years to grow majestic.

So there you are. You can't tell how you're doing. I mean, if you really want to know, you could, of course, ask the people in your family—but that's another story. You can't tell how you're doing. What you'll see is tension and difficulty in your body, because you have a physical body, and also potential to live with this body in a healthy and beautiful way. But it will have pain. Anybody not have pain, you can have your money back. Right? You just get suffering along with joy in this life. This is human incarnation.

And then you notice the judging mind and the doubting mind and the frightened mind and the angry mind. There's praise and blame and gain and loss. This is the working stuff of a human incarnation. Don't tell too many stories about it. Name it. Water the beautiful seeds. Let the other ones go by. It's not that complicated. Water the seeds of love, of compassion, of presence.

Because your stories are likely—and "likely" I would underline—to be inaccurate. I remember at the end of a retreat we had down in Joshua Tree, in Yucca Valley. We used this wonderful retreat center, Institute of Mental Physics, for thirty-eight years. And there was a woman who left the retreat—she told me this story later.

She went to Palm Springs Airport and got a bag of her favorite chocolate chip cookies that they sold at one of the market stores there. She went to the waiting area of her gate and sat down. There were a bunch of seats and little tables every three or four seats. She put her cookies and her stuff down and sat there for a while just looking at her phone or whatever you do in an airport these days.

Then she noticed that the guy next to her was opening her bag of cookies. That was really weird. He took one out and ate it, and he looked at her as he did it and tipped the bag to her like, "You want one too?" She was thinking, "Okay, I don't know about this." So without saying any words but feeling really strange, he ate a cookie and she ate a cookie. What is happening here, right? She was somewhat upset by it, but okay, coming from a retreat, she thought, "I'll be compassionate," and so forth.

So then it was time to get on the plane. The cookies were gone. She got her stuff, settled into her seat, and as she was putting her stuff away, she opened her purse—and there was her bag of cookies.

Don't put too much stock in the stories you tell about yourself in the world. There's always another point of view. And then you see, you are the Buddha, but you're embarrassed Buddha, chagrin Buddha, foolish Buddha, as Ryokan said. "You know, this year no change." There's happy Buddha and sad Buddha, sun Buddha, moon Buddha. You contain all of these. And you rest in the mystery of being alive—this amazing thing that you have this life and you get to shape it. You get to make something beautiful out of it.

I think that's why, in a certain way, people have helped to build this place at Spirit Rock—not as a monument to something, but really as a place that's a reminder of how magnificent you are and what you can be, what beautiful seeds you can plant and how you can tend them. And that you can trust this.

Pablo Neruda says, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's some life force that wants to renew us. Even in the body politic, which seems so divisive now, and in many ways destructive—and worse than that—at times it feels like we are, instead of, as Lincoln said, "with malice toward none and charity toward all," almost reversing it. We're dividing those who are valued and those who are vulnerable and are not valued, and throwing them out of our hearts and out of our willingness to be in communion.

And yet, we are in communion. Every breath you take is breathed by all those other people. Every breath you take, as I say, came over the Pacific and dusted Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, and before that it dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. We are in this one together. This is our family.

Pablo Neruda, so beautiful. But if you plant seeds, then something good will come. As Thoreau said, "I don't know how long it will take, but I'm prepared to expect miracles and wonders." Pablo Neruda also wrote another line for spring, one of his love poems. He said, "I want to do with you what spring does to the cherry trees." How's that for a little romantic line?

So Kathy Sneed, some years ago in the 1980s, started a prison garden project. She was concerned for the soul death of so many people who've been incarcerated. Sadly, we have these enormous racist poverty

prisons—if you're born in the wrong place or the wrong race or wrong skin color, the likelihood is you're going to end up in prison, and not for doing much. So she began a project in the San Francisco City and County Jail, which is a pretty big establishment. Men were invited to grow vegetables in a garden plot behind one of the prison buildings, which had been there from decades before when there had been a prison garden. Through fundraising, she was able to offer them seedlings and mulch, fertilizer and simple garden tools.

To be able to grow a garden with their own hands, to be responsible for its blossoming, to overcome insects and drought—this brought out the best in these thrown away people. It awakened a connection to and caring for something outside of themselves. Kathy tells about one macho giant saying, "Don't step on my babies," as he walked through the garden.

The prison wardens were amazed by the change. The gardens became so important to those who cared for these patches that their lives began to revolve around them. In fact, when time came for these men to be released from prison, some purposefully recommitted petty crimes or violated parole so they could get back to their gardens. That's when Kathy realized that she needed to start a garden project for ex-prisoners, which she did.

"Do not judge me by my successes," says Nelson Mandela. "Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

Tend your garden in a way that's beautiful. Choose the seeds. Even as you listen tonight, you know what the seeds are that you really would most want to plant in this incarnation, in this life. And then water them with your attention, with your dedication, with your devotion.

I'll close with a blessing from John O'Donohue, that wonderful poet. He writes:

On the day when the weight deadens on your shoulders and you stumble, may the clay dance to balance you. And when your eyes freeze behind the gray window and the ghost of loss gets into you, may a flock of colors—indigo, red, green, and azure blue—come to awaken in you a meadow of delight. When the canvas frays and the cork of thought and the stain of ocean blackens beneath you, may there come across the waters a path of yellow moonlight to bring you safely home. May the nourishment of the earth be yours. May the clarity of light be yours. May the fluency of the ocean be yours. And may the protection of the ancestors be yours. And so may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to tend your life.

One more reflection came as we were sitting quietly. You don't just water your own seeds. There are gardens next to yours that could also be quite beautiful, and you have water to spare. The world needs you to also water the seeds of goodness, of compassion, of presence, of dedication around you. The society needs it—whether it's raising conscious children or creating a conscious business or standing up for justice or standing for the vulnerable or tending them. But to do so in a way that waters the beauty in them and the best in them.

As Nelson Mandela said, "It never hurts to think the best of someone. They often act the better because of it."

Seek out your ways to water the seeds of goodness and make a difference both in your own heart and in all that you touch in the world.

Enjoy the spring.

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