Remembering Ajahn Chah

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:04:27

Please let yourself sit in a way that's comfortable and at ease. For tonight, let yourself listen as you would in a meditation practice. It's not a lecture where you have to take notes, and there's no quiz at the end. It's more about listening to see if something resonates as true for you, something that reminds your heart and spirit of what you already know to be important, deep, and valuable. The rest of it you can simply let go.

I'm very happy to be able to sit together. It's a bit of a disaster out there in certain ways with our news—problematic, to say the least. But to be able to come and sit together in the midst of the changes in the world, many of which are rather dramatic, to quiet the mind and tend the heart so that we can hold it all in a wise way and hopefully respond in a wise way, to be together in that spirit of wisdom and compassion—this is really important.

If we look, there are things that remind us or awaken us out of our separateness, out of our habit of checking off our to-do lists and feeling isolated from the rest of the world. These experiences awaken us and remind us to love. Remember what it was like when you were in love? I know almost all of you can remember that. It's pretty sweet, isn't it? And it's actually possible to be in love with the world, with people, with this place. This mysterious, marvelous human realm with its unbearable beauty and its ocean of tears—you can love this. You can step out of that sense of isolation and separateness, what's sometimes called the small sense of self, or the body of fear.

We get reminded of it in so many different ways. Sometimes walking in the high mountains, or listening to an amazing piece of music, or making love, or sitting at the bedside of someone who's dying. The gates between the worlds open, and you realize, "Oh yes, this is also going to happen to me." Isn't this mysterious, that we have a certain life for a certain time? Or being there for the birth of a child—that's so wild. Here's another human being. Where do they come from? It's wild.

Another way that we wake up—and it's beautiful just to recognize that we can wake up from the trance we move in—is sometimes through spiritual teachings or teachers of different kinds who remind us of our own beauty, our own buddha nature, our own fundamental goodness. Somehow we are supported. Even as we come here to Spirit Rock, we're supported by a stream of thousands of years of people who also treasured awakening and compassion and connection with all life and respect.

I know that for a time I did a Tibetan practice where you do full prostrations and visualize a tree of benefactors—your teachers and the people who've blessed you. You populate the tree with everybody who's ever been a teacher or guide or mentor or benefactor. I started filling my tree up, and it became like a Christmas tree: that one, and that one, and that one. Then I would bow and say thank you. Because we're

not here alone. You're here with your ancestors. We're here with the ancestors of this land, the Miwok who lived and tended this land. We're here with thousands of generations.

Tonight, because this week marks one hundred years since my teacher Ajahn Chah was born—his hundredth birthday—I want to share something of that lineage. I can still hear his voice, which is a fantastic thing. Don't you know that experience when someone you cared about deeply has died, and there are moments when you can still hear just what they sounded like and what they'd say? I feel very blessed by that. I want to talk about the stream of teachings that have come to Spirit Rock, teachings that I received, that so many other people received, from this wonderful teacher.

A few weeks ago, Ajahn Pasanno, who runs Abhayagiri Monastery in Mendocino, came and offered a whole day on the hundredth birthday teachings of Ajahn Chah. My other dear friends—Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Amaro, Ayya Anandabodhi—all these beautiful monastics who still carry his spirit are also part of our community.

I first met Ajahn Chah when he was forty-nine years old, in 1967. He was a very plain-spoken person. His main language was Lao, which I had fortunately learned during my years in the Peace Corps, when I was on medical village teams doing tropical medicine work on the border of Laos and Thailand.

Looking at this picture of him smiling, I used to think of him as kind of like a frog because he had this giant mouth that could turn down. Then he would get animated and it would turn up, and this huge laughter would come out of him.

When I first arrived, there were forty-five monks and a couple dozen nuns at his monastery. When he died, thirty years later, a million people went to his funeral, including the King and Queen of Thailand. He became a truly revered fountain of wisdom in that culture.

He lived as part of the tradition of forest monks, those who live in the jungles and forests. He had his little bag of roots and herbs and herbal medicine. He'd lived in caves, out with the tigers. It was remarkable, during the years I was there, to be able to live in these somewhat remote forest monasteries.

But I realized that before I talk a bit more about him, I want to let him introduce himself to you. There is just a six-minute clip from a BBC documentary called *The Mindful Way* that was shot in the 1970s that will give you a little taste of it.

These monks in northeast Thailand are on Bindabhat, the daily dawn walk to receive their food offered by the villagers. Not all monks in Thailand keep strictly to the discipline prescribed by the Buddha, but these monks strive to maintain the original forest tradition of a pure and simple life. They're not allowed to possess money nor grow their own food. This ensures their total dependence on the lay community, so they can't cut themselves off in a spiritual cocoon.

The abbot, the venerable Ajahn Chah, has been in robes for 50 years.

"Here in the forest, you can learn to be in harmony with the way things are in nature. You can live happily and peacefully. Buddhist monks don't practice meditation for selfish reasons. We practice in order to know ourselves so that then we'll be able to understand and teach others how to live peacefully and wisely."

This monk has been ordained for 15 years. He's respected not only for his skill in meditation, but also for his practical skills, his consistent mindfulness.

Meditation doesn't just involve being at peace with the world. Confronting the self can be like walking into a raging storm. It's quite usual at first to despair, even to want to kill oneself.

"Some people think that a monk's life is a lazy and an easy one. If that's what they think, they should just try and see how long they can stand it. A monk's work is hard. He works to free his heart so that he begins to feel loving kindness which embraces everything. He sees that all life has the characteristic of the breath. It rises and it falls. Everything that is born expires. So his suffering diminishes as he knows that nothing belongs to him."

"To help people contemplate the true nature of the body, we have human skeletons in the assembly hall. Because when one doesn't understand death, life is very confusing."

"Buddha made a distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth. The idea of a self is merely a convention. Foreigner, Thai, you, the interviewer—these are all conventions. In ultimate reality, there isn't anybody. There is only earth, fire, water, air—elements which have combined temporarily. We call the body a person, mind. But ultimately, there is no me. There is only anatta, not self. When we see beyond self, we no longer cling to happiness. And when we stop clinging, we can begin to be happy."

"Shouldn't be concerned with nirvana or attaining nirvana. If you are, then that in itself will prevent you from gaining nirvana."

"So what should a monk's main concern be?"

"The aim is to let go."

"So you have to let go but without striving to let go?"

"That's right. You should let go without desire. If there's still desire in the pursuit to do that, then that's not nirvana."

"Be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still like a clear forest pool. All kinds of rare animals will come to drink at the pool. You will see many wonderful and strange things come and go, but you will be still. Problems will arise, but you will see through them immediately. This is the happiness of the Buddha."

I think Ajahn Chah would have been laughing at that voice recognition that was trying to make language translations from Thai and Lao into some really wild stuff. Siri does that all the time, but she was really in good form tonight.

But you get a sense in seeing him of both the delight that he had and the wisdom and the honesty.

When he first came to the U.S., we picked him up at the Boston airport.

And drove him along Memorial Drive in Boston. "Okay, this is MIT, and this is Harvard." We went through Harvard Square and so forth. He was okay with all of that.

And then we got on the Massachusetts Turnpike to go out to our center in central Massachusetts in Barre, in the hills. We got a little ways outside of Boston, outside the big ring road, and then of course it turned into more agricultural land, lots of trees and so forth, which you see across New England.

So we're driving along, and he said, "What's this?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "All these trees." I said, "They're trees." He said, "Pull over."

So we pulled over. He got out of the car and walked up to the fence, and there was one of those New England forests. He was smelling the air, and he said, "Forest! What kind of animals live here? Are there bears? Are there lions?" He just loved the forest.

I said, "Okay, there used to be bears. There are occasionally, but mostly it's deer and this and that." "Well, how far do these forests go?" he asked. I said, "Well, probably from here north through Canada, maybe a thousand miles." He said, "Oh, forest monks! Great! The right place for us."

You see, his vision of the U.S.—when he was a boy, he'd seen some cowboy movies, so he'd seen the western desert with people on horses, and then he'd seen movies about New York City. He had no idea that we actually had forests here. He was completely delighted.

And he and his colleague, another great master, Ajahn Buddhadasa, when we talked about the hard time that people have in the West meditating and caring for themselves, loving themselves, how much self-hatred and self-judgment there is—they said, "Bring them out to the forests. Let them spend time with the trees and the rhythm of the moon and the sun and the stars, and teach them practices of loving-kindness and compassion. That will soothe their hearts and get them sane again." Something like that was his answer.

So I had gone to find a master when I was quite young. After graduating from college, I asked the Peace Corps to send me to a Buddhist country because I knew I needed something to help me with the kind of inner struggles that young people have. But I had a lot of them, and my family was difficult. My father was a violent, abusive person.

Last week I was in Los Angeles with my beloved, with Trudy, and we went as volunteers to a shelter for battered women. We went with Amy Wakeland, who's the wife of Eric Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles, who supports a number of really great projects. We were interested in her center and in sending mindfulness teachers and compassion teachers to places like this.

And I found it so poignant to be there. First of all, it was a secret place. They wouldn't tell us where it was. They had to van us there because they didn't want anybody to know the address, to protect the women who were there.

All of a sudden I started to get all these memories from my past—of my mother hiding bottles behind the curtains so she would have a weapon to defend herself in certain rooms, of not going out in public except in long sleeves because of all the black and blue on her body, and the kind of terror that I experienced from my father. It was the 1950s, and there weren't places like this. She had four kids, and she kept saying, "I should leave him." But she didn't.

So it was a very painful and poignant place to be, and to meet women who were being cared for and held and taken in—in some way that I wished my mother could have experienced, and that we could have too. I have to say, I heard on the radio today that our Attorney General has now declared that even if you are the victim of horrific violence of this kind, you're not eligible for asylum in the U.S., which kind of breaks my heart and makes me want to actually do something politically. That's another story that's important.

Anyway, when you go into Ajahn Chah's monastery, it was entering a place of peace. It felt so peaceful in this forest. It's the way Spirit Rock has become for many people, especially those who've taken a series of classes or done a residential retreat. People will come in with the stress in their life—their financial problems, the things they have to take care of, stuff going on with their body, their confusion, their dreams, their creativity, questions of how to live, in the middle of a divorce—all the things that make up our modern human life.

And I love watching people's faces, especially people who go on retreat. They come in haggard, and they leave with what we call the Vipassana facelift. Their eyes are brighter, their faces look five or ten years younger. We could sell this in Hollywood, I know we could. And they're paying attention to the movement of the clouds and to the flowers blooming around the dining hall. It's almost like they get their spirit and their life back in some way. It's a beautiful thing.

So the same kind of experience was what it was like to walk into his forest monastery. Fortunately, we have it here in this beautiful valley. There was the jungle, and then you'd enter, and there would be these long paths that were swept clean every day. It was part of our job as monks and nuns with these long bamboo brooms. And it didn't matter if you swept the path absolutely clean—by the time you got to the other end, the leaves were already falling where you'd started. The point was somehow to do it with graciousness and beauty, to make the sweeping itself a part of the rhythm of life there.

So you'd come in and you'd see people who were dignified. There was a kind of impeccability, a terrific care for discipline. And somehow they made the inner beauty mirrored by the outer beauty. There was some way in which they made that inner peace visible through how they cared for the forests and the paths and the robes.

And then there were little signs as you came in, like: "You there, be quiet. We're trying to meditate. This is not the city." Or: "Hey there, life is short. What matters to you? Come on, get on with it." Little nudgy Dharma signs. The idea was somehow to create, as we have in this valley, a place that reminds us of another way to be.

Of course, we were near the border of Cambodia and Laos. So when I was there—both on those tropical medicine teams and then in the monastery—it was the time of the American war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Southeast Asian War. There was a big air base not far away, so we would see fighter jets and bombers relatively frequently.

I remember these friends who came, who were in the IVS, the International Volunteer Service, which was the equivalent of the Peace Corps—but I believe it was actually run by the CIA in Vietnam and Laos, because they weren't safe enough for Peace Corps. Anyway, that's another whole story. But they came in and they were upset with me. We were old friends. "What are you doing sitting on your butt when there's a war going on? When there are people who are in danger? When unthinkable cruel things are happening and suffering is enormous? Why don't you come back out and join the fight in some way?"

What happened after they stayed in the monastery for about a week is they began to realize that it was a zone of peace. They talked to Ajahn Chah about it, and he said, "You know, for those of us who live as monks in this thousand-year-old tradition, wars come and go and leaders come and go. Our task is to create a place of sanity that reminds people, even when there's great difficulty, that there is another way."

Because if you were around the war zone, you had to be careful—your life would be in danger, your things would be stolen, people are desperate. In the monastery, you could lose your gold earring or your wallet and somebody would pick it up and place it on the altar until you came back. It was a place of such integrity, such care. It was like an island of sanity.

And then Ajahn Chah said, "We human beings are constantly in combat, at war, trying to escape the fact of being so limited—limited by so many circumstances we cannot control. But instead of escaping, we continue to create suffering: waging war with evil, waging war with good, waging war with what is too small, waging war with what is too big, waging war with what is too short or too long, right or wrong, courageously carrying on the battle. Why not stop the war? Why not step out of the battle and come to a place of peace?"

It was really a visionary place in that way. Perhaps another night I'll tell a story about being in a remarkable monastery of a similar kind in the Mekong Delta, in the middle of the war in Vietnam, that

was also a zone of peace—where those who were trying to run from the bombings and firefights could come and find refuge.

What Ajahn Chah talked about, and my other teachers as well, is that it's not just that we have to do away with landmines and bombing. We have to do away with the landmines in the human heart. We have to do away with the violence in the human heart. Here we live in a society where there's racism and environmental destruction and continuing warfare. Where does it come from? It comes from us human beings. It comes from our own minds and hearts. And some of us have to stop, have to find a different way, and become that, and model that. This is a reminder, an invitation.

You could hear in the last part of that video, even with all the funny language underneath, Ajahn Chah talking about the still forest pool—to let things take their natural course, to let your heart and mind become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool, and to see all the wonders of the world, the amazing things. Mary Oliver's line: "I was a bride married to amazement."

For Ajahn Chah, there's this new biography that was just published by a friend who was a monk—a thousand pages or something, full of great stories. Because I was there, I'm loving reading it. It tells in part about his own practice, which wasn't easy in his early years. He lived out in jungles.

There were tigers, and he lived in the caves, and tremendous physical pain, and all the kinds of struggles that one might have as a renunciate in a very poor environment. Part of the time anyway, in the dry season, there was not a great deal to eat in those villages, and he was struggling somehow to find a place of unshakable peace in himself.

When we came to the monastery, his instructions were actually quite simple and not very different than what we did tonight. He called it taking the one seat. He said, just go into the room and put one chair in the center. Take the one seat in the center of the room, open the doors and windows, and see who comes to visit. You'll witness all kinds of scenes and actors, all kinds of temptations and stories, everything imaginable. Your only job is to stay in your seat. You'll see it all arise and pass. And out of this, wisdom, deep compassion, and understanding will arise.

I like to use the word loving awareness as a synonym for mindfulness. And for Ajahn Chah, meditation wasn't about gaining some special state. It was taking the one seat in the middle of it all, stopping the war against the way things are. Instead, quieting the mind, bringing the spirit of loving awareness here, letting things settle, and then noticing when you get entangled, when you get caught, when you get afraid and reactive, and discovering that it's possible to see that with loving awareness and not get so caught, to find a kind of inner freedom.

Someone asked him at one point, what is the Dharma? This is a word that means truth, it means the teachings—it's kind of a complicated set of different meanings. And he said, the Dharma is the heart. If you want to practice the Dharma or learn the Dharma, learn the truth, learn the way, just look into the

heart. What spirit, what heart are you using to guide your life, to move through this world? Why not quiet yourself and listen in a way so that you're in touch with your heart rather than all the things that people around you want you to do? He would ask, what's the state of your heart today?

He was very interested in human suffering. Anybody here have that? But his interest was not just in suffering. He would say that's not the end of the story. There's suffering, there's its causes, and there's its end. Life has pain—everybody knows that. There's pleasure and pain and gain and loss and fame and disrepute and joy and sorrow and praise and blame and hot and cold. This is what makes up life in some way. But suffering is different. Suffering is all our reactions and responses and entanglements in it. And he wanted us to shift from the creation of suffering to the freedom of heart.

My teacher Nisargadatta used to say, the mind creates suffering, the mind creates the abyss, and the heart crosses it. And he wanted us to really listen from the heart.

I remember being there, and there was a big festival at the closest village to the forest monastery. Usually it was very quiet, but they had giant loudspeakers and all kinds of music and a village fair. One of the monks came and complained that it wasn't quiet. Ajahn Chah laughed. He said, there's the noise, but I have a question. Who's bothering who? The noise isn't doing anything. What is your relationship to it? Who's bothering who?

He would tootle around the monastery at different points, and if you looked like you were having a hard time, he'd gaze at you and say, hmm, you suffering today? If you said no, he'd say, wonderful, enjoy the day. If you said yes, he'd say, hmm, must be quite attached. And then he'd sort of tootle off. That was it. That was how simple it was. It wasn't very complicated. He wanted us to see how we got entangled and where the roots were, which were in our own lives.

I remember one Western monk, an English monk named Aranya Po. He's kind of famous for this story because he was never satisfied. He went to a remote forest monastery, but it was too quiet. There wasn't any good teaching.

So Ajahn Chah sent him to a monastery near Bangkok where there was this famous teacher, but it was too noisy. Then he went to a monastery on the Cambodian border, but it was too poor. He just always couldn't find the satisfactory thing. Finally, he came back. Everyone was sitting around with Ajahn Chah, and he was asking about where to go next to find the right thing. And Ajahn Chah said, "You know, this poor monk—he must have put his monk's bag down in dog shit. And everywhere he goes, it smells bad." As I said, he was very plain spoken, but you get the message, right?

When I was sitting in meditation classes, trying to be very peaceful—yeah, Mr. Peace, right?—all this anger came up. It really shocked me because I was not going to be like my father, a violent, angry person. So where did that anger go? All suppressed in there. And then I'm sitting, and all this stuff starts to come up.

I went to see him because some monk in the nearby hut had done something—just a small thing—and I just got enraged. I knew it had nothing to do with that monk; I was at least that savvy. I said, "All this anger is coming up. What should I do?"

He smiled and said, "Oh, good. You get to learn about anger. It's the hot season. Go in your hut, little tin roof hut. Close the one window and the door. Wrap yourself in all your robes and cook." He said, "If you're going to be angry, do it right. Sit in the middle of it and name it—anger, or fire—so you're not so damn afraid of it."

His direction came from this faith that if we could turn toward our deepest experiences—the deep experiences of love and care and connection, and also the things we fear like anxiety and anger—if we could actually sit in their presence, there would grow a shift of identity. This is the great gift of meditation: a shift from the contents—here's anger, here's fear—to loving awareness itself that would say, "Oh, this is the angry mind. This is how the angry mind works. This is the heart that's been hurt." Mostly anger comes because we've been hurt or we've been frightened, or there's something we've been in some way abused or mistreated.

He said, "These things are natural. You have to learn to be in the presence of all the energies of nature—the wild energies and the peaceful and beautiful ones."

"Desire comes," he said. "Make your loving awareness like a parent taking a kid to the store." You know by the checkout there's all the candy, right? And the idea from the parent isn't to hit the child or something like that. You just see that they're a kid and they want everything, and that's part of being a child. Desire is natural. There's healthy desire and unhealthy desire. It's not until you become the loving awareness that you have a choice to decide which are the ones you want to give to this child, which are the things that are healthy for you and which are not.

There was some way in which he just made it our common humanity. We'd be sitting around with him, and he'd introduce his monks to people. "Some of my monks are really big eaters, like me." Ajahn Chah was a little bit overweight, he would say of himself. "They're all like me. We do that. Some of my monks are just big sleepers. They eat and then they sleep."

And then I've got some monks who all they want to do is meditate. I think they're afraid of relating, basically.

I remember bringing a group of friends to visit Ajahn Chah in his monastery in the seventies—Joseph Goldstein, Mark Epstein, a whole bunch of people who are now dharma teachers, and Ram Dass. We were all sitting around, and Ram Dass was about fifteen years older than the rest of us. We were still maybe around thirty years old, and Ram Dass was like forty-five or something, with a beard, coming from India. The first thing Ajahn Chah did was peer around the group. "Okay, who'd you bring?" And then he said, "Hey, who's the old man you brought with you?" He was right on Ram Dass's case immediately.

But he could also be so tender. We went to visit the largest Trappist monastery in New England, called Spencer Abbey—one of the main Trappist monasteries, like Thomas Merton's Gethsemane Abbey. When Ajahn Chah was there, we went to visit because those monks, who lived a few towns over, had become friends, and some of them would come and sit at our retreat center in Barre. The abbot, Father Thomas Keating, was a gracious and very wise, beautiful man who has become a kind of famous Christian contemplative. So we took Ajahn Chah over there.

About a hundred of their monks in their black and white outfits—which remind me of penguins, elegant penguins, I have to say—were there in the courtyard. And then there were these monks in their dusty orange robes, a different costume altogether. All the monks were gathered. Thomas Keating is this very tall man, and Ajahn Chah is quite short, a little bit round. They were standing next to each other. I introduced them, and Ajahn Chah sized him up very quickly, as he used to do. He just peered at people.

And then he said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Thomas Keating asked, "Why is he saying 'I'm so sorry'?" It was a strange greeting, right? "I'm so sorry."

And then Ajahn Chah turned around and looked at all the hundred monks who were there, and he said, "You know, being an abbot is a really, really hard job. And you should love and support this man. He's really doing you a favor to take this role."

Keating's eyes lit up, and this huge smile came across his face. Yes—somebody understands.

So Ajahn Chah was very tender at times. And his interest was to shift from confusion and difficulty and fear—all those things that we have and know—to finding peace in your own heart, to finding well-being.

When he was teaching at IMS, at our retreat center in Massachusetts, I remember we were out wandering, taking a walk on the great big grassy lawn in front, and people were doing their walking meditation. He turned to me and said, "You know, this place looks like a big hospital." It wasn't the forest—it was big brick buildings, New England style. And then he started to walk up to people as they were doing their walking meditation. He'd smile and say, "I hope you get well soon."

But he didn't set things up as some kind of ideal. He told us that when he was a young abbot, trying to get it all right, wanting everybody to behave in the right way, they would never do exactly what he wanted. You know how people are, right? So he said, "All right, I've figured it out now." He had all the monks come in and lie down, lining up with their feet on a certain line in the meditation hall, so they were all very even. And he said, "That's really great, except for one thing—your heads aren't even." So then he had them slide down until their heads were all in a line. And he said, "That's really great, except for one thing—your feet aren't even."

Finally he said, "Okay, stand up. This is who we are. We're short and tall, and this is the way that it is. We have to live with each other the way that we are, not the way that we imagine we're supposed to be."

It wasn't idealistic.

The driver taking us was a young guy who drove really fast, as certain young men like to do—some of whom I've known quite intimately, but I'll leave that aside. It was a one-lane dirt road through the mountains, maybe one and a half lanes, so two cars could pass if they went slowly. Mostly it was pretty empty in those days. But once in a while, a logging truck or a bus would come around a curve. And this guy was just careening around the corners. You couldn't really see what was ahead.

I'm holding on, thinking, okay, I'm going to die a monk. I guess this is it. I started to breathe and center myself, getting ready for my death. And then I look over at Ajahn Chah, and his knuckles are white too. Somehow that gave me some relief. Okay. So we're in it together.

Finally, we asked him to slow down. He wouldn't listen—didn't slow down, or not very much. But we made it. We pulled into the courtyard of the Cambodian monastery, and Ajahn Chah looked over at me, smiled, and said, "Scary ride, wasn't it?"

It was beautiful. It wasn't like he was going to pretend there wasn't fear. It was like going to Disneyland and riding the big roller coaster. It was just fear. Fear is what the body does at certain moments. Scary ride.

And I knew he wasn't afraid of dying. In many ways, he had shown that. He was simply saying: these emotions, they come. It's totally fine to see the way things are and to know that you have the capacity—your loving awareness—to be present for this life, and to know that you are bigger than all of it.

I remember when I was very sick with malaria. I was wretched, lying on the floor of my little hut on my robes. Ajahn Chah came to visit. He looked at me, and again, the language was very simple.

He said, "Sick, huh?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Fever and pain, huh?"

I said, "Lots of it."

He said, "Yeah. Makes you want to go home to your mother, doesn't it?"

I said, "Yes. Yes."

He said, "Well, this is suffering. This is suffering. Most of us as monks have had this a number of times. Now there's good medicine. I'll send the medicine monk over to help you. But you know, you can do this. This is just malaria. We know how to do this."

And he just stood there. I could feel that he'd been through it all. He was saying, yeah, yeah, we know how

to do this. It's tough, but it's okay.

It wasn't some ideal. It was that we know how to be wise. We know how to be compassionate and loving in the midst of it all. These were the kinds of trainings he would give to people who came.

After I left—I was the second Westerner to be with him—there was a monk named Ajahn Sumedho, the one who had told me about Ajahn Chah. He had been there for a few years before me and became an abbot himself and a very wonderful teacher.

As the word got out that this was a great master, Western European and North American students, Japanese people from around the world started to come. One visitor began to see these different foreign monks arriving and asked Ajahn Chah whether he spoke English or French or German or Japanese. In every case, he replied no, he couldn't. The questioner looked confused. How did the foreign monks learn anything then?

He answered with a question. "Do you keep animals at home? Have you got any cats or dogs? Any oxen or buffalo?"

"Yes."

"Well, can you speak cat language? Do you speak dog? Can you speak buffalo?"

"No."

"Then how do they know what you want them to do?"

This was his first reply. Then he summarized: "It's not that difficult. Training the Westerners is like training water buffalo. You just keep tugging on the rope and soon they catch on."

But he could be so tender. A farmer would come whose child had died, and Ajahn Chah would hold him and put his head in his lap, just so compassionate. Then the next day some puffed up, corrupt official from Bangkok would arrive with all his medals. Ajahn Chah would take out his false teeth so he looked kind of gummy, and give some lecture about karma and corruption and dishonesty and where it was going to lead.

Underneath it all, beneath the form of the monastery, there was tremendous care. The rules were kept, the virtue and the vinaya. It was like the form of a beautiful poem. If you write a sonnet, you have a certain meter and a certain number of lines. But within that, you can make great beauty. So there were these outer forms that we followed, but inside there was a tremendous sense of freedom. He could laugh at almost anything and see where you were holding on.

There was a Western woman who became a nun at the monastery that was built about eight miles away in a village. There were so many Westerners that Ajahn Chah had said, "Why don't we make a monastery where the teachings are in English?" He asked Ajahn Sumedho, this American monk, to be the abbot, and

the villagers built this beautiful monastery. There were twenty or thirty Westerners. This nun, who was quite eloquent and learned the language, became one of the villagers' favorites.

After about five years, she left. People were disappointed. A year later, she came back—but she had gotten another kind of religion. She'd become a born-again Christian, and an evangelist at that. So she came back to the monastery, and now she was trying to tell everybody about Jesus.

She was not terribly popular in the monastery for doing that, and not terribly popular with the villagers who had supported her, but she was still there doing it. They were really upset. Finally, in their upset, a whole group of villagers and some of the monks walked over to Ajahn Chah's monastery. They told the story of her coming back and trying to convert everybody, saying Jesus was the way. They were all upset.

He listened to it. He knew this was happening—the grapevine in the monastery is like any other grapevine. He listened to it all. How could she do this? We fed her and trusted her and now she's come back. He listened for a while, sat quietly, and said, "Well, you know, maybe she's right."

And it just diffused it. Everybody was on their horse about how it was supposed to be. We need that wisdom now with all the political conflict as well.

Maybe there's something that actually needs to be listened to from somebody who's different. And it doesn't mean you can't respond. It doesn't mean that there aren't things we need to stand up for now. But how do we do it, and from which place? Do we do it out of aggression or out of fear? That just perpetuates it. Or can we stop the war and respond by saying, this is something worth standing up for, that really matters—but to do it with the kind of courage like Gandhi would, to say, do what you will, I have to stand up for this because my love for you and everyone else, even those of you who are creating suffering, I love you too. And I love you so much that I don't want to let you continue to make this kind of suffering for others. It's a very different way of responding.

Ajahn Chah taught a kind of fearlessness—to be present for this human life, to tolerate it, and to allow all the energies of life. As you meditate, you learn how to really be present. He also taught how to step back and see that like the breath, it's all impermanent, that you can't grasp it. He said, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you really learn to let go, you can move anywhere freely.

And that was part of his teaching. He went to visit Ajahn Mun—*ajahn* means a kind of *acharya* in Sanskrit, a master or teacher—one of the other great forest masters. Ajahn Chah was still practicing as a monk in the forest after about ten years of living in caves and doing his meditation. Along with great struggles, when he was finally able to practice deeply, he experienced deep insights and visions and light, all the kinds of meditation experiences one might have.

So he went to see this great master, Ajahn Mun, bowed and paid his respects, and said, "I want to tell you about all my meditation practices and what I've seen and learned," and kind of laid out all those

experiences. Ajahn Mun sat quietly, listened, and then looked up and said, "Chah, you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. They're like movies." He said, "You go to the movies and there's a romantic comedy and there's a documentary and there's a war movie and there's a historical drama. They appear on the screen and disappear." He said, "These are the same. Luminous states and rapture and physical pain and suffering and insights and confusion—those are all states. The only question that matters if you want to be free is: to whom do they happen? Turn your attention from the changing experiences back to consciousness itself, to awareness, what we're calling loving awareness or consciousness itself. Become the witnessing—what in that language is called become the one who knows, become the knowing."

So you become loving awareness that is the witness to all of this—joys and sorrows, praise and blame, gain and loss. And when you do, then the real freedom and real well-being, the happiness that's not dependent on anything, the happiness for no cause, the freedom that's not dependent on circumstances—will start to mature and grow in your own heart. To stop the war with the world, to take one seat in the middle of all things, and then become the one who knows. Become the Buddha, the awakened one, loving awareness itself.

I have this beautiful set of poems that were sent to me recently, translations from the earliest Buddhist nuns:

One morning after alms round, begging for my breakfast, looking down at one more meal I hadn't worked for, hadn't paid for, and hadn't earned, a life of debts I could never repay, pushing in on all sides like the weight of the sea, I blinked. A tear fell into my bowl. Would it always feel like this? Just as the moon rises up from the bottom of the sea, a handful of rice lifted itself from the bottom of my bowl and my heart rose with it and opened. I wish I could tell you how it tasted, that first bite of food as a free woman.

These are called the songs of enlightenment. There was a moment when, in that taste, all of a sudden all the things she thought she should be and who she was dropped away, and the vastness and mystery opened.

It happens that that vastness and mystery is who you are. You are consciousness itself that was born into that body of yours. Where do you think you came from? You're certainly not the physical body. As I say, you are not kale and Big Macs. It's just not who you are. And you're not your emotions, I hope—they're nice at times and terrible at others. And you're certainly not your thoughts. First of all, they come and disappear just like that. Which one is you? Spirit, consciousness, born into this body will leave this body. You'll see. It's going to happen sometime.

What a trip that was, that life, wasn't it? You'll see. I told you so, right?

And here you are in the middle of this mystery. You're in this mystery. What you are is consciousness, is spirit, having this human experience. And without understanding, you're like a boat without a rudder.

When you come to the temple, as you have, or you go to that forest monastery, it's really a place of

reminder that what you're seeking is who you are, and where you're going is here—because there's only now. You can imagine other things, but actually all you have is what's now. It's always now. This is where we're going.

And so to remind you, amidst the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, you have the perfect place to awaken. You don't have to go to some forest monastery in the jungles of Thailand or Burma. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. You don't have to live in some cave. You have all the perfect conditions for awakening in your very own life, in your own body and mind. And when you do, then you can really care for the world in a whole different way.

This last weekend, I was teaching for Buddha Fest in Los Angeles, which was a big festival of Buddhist teachers and films and arts. But I was up here, unable to be there in person, and so I Skyped in to a dialogue with my beloved Trudy, my wife, who's a teacher inside LA, and with Ram Dass. There were hundreds of people there and thousands of people online, and we had about an hour-long conversation about awakening and loving awareness and what's possible for us. Because it's not in India. It's not in the jungles. It happens to be in your own heart.

As we came toward the end of that, Ram Dass told one of his favorite stories about how, when he was in India after some years with his guru, his guru was urging him to go back to the U.S. to teach and to offer these teachings. And Ram Dass demurred and said, "You know, I'm not ready. I'm too neurotic. I'm too impure. I'm too imperfect. How could I offer the teachings of love that you have embodied so much? How could I do that? I just feel too imperfect."

And his teacher got up off the little wooden bench where he sat and very slowly, taking a couple of minutes, walked around Ram Dass and peered at him from his feet to his head, looked in his clothes and looked in the back, peered at him all around. Then he sat back down and gazed at him and said, "I see no imperfections."

In India, it's called the glance of mercy. It's that love that happens when someone looks at you and sees the secret beauty that was born into you as a child—that's inviolable, that no one can take away—and recognizes your beauty.

So there we are, Ram Dass is talking about all these kinds of things, and then a woman raises her hand in the question period at the end. She says, "You know, Ram Dass, you had a guru. You went to India. Here I am in Los Angeles. What can I do?"

And I said to her, "You know, you're a little bit like the person sitting by the river asking for water." I said, "Ram Dass, can you see her in the camera?" I forget what her name was—it might have been Vivian or something. "Can you see Vivian?" "Yeah." I said, "Do you have anything to say to her?"

And he just looked at her and said, "I love you. I love you completely, just the way you are, exactly as you are." And then he looked at all of them and he said, "I love you all, every one of you." He was on a roll. He

was loving everything by the time it was done. And you could see it and feel it in the group—it changed everybody.

Just to have somebody gaze at them with that much love and say, "Yes, I love you. And you are exactly as you should be—the universe has brought you here. You are completely lovable and worthy of love."

The Buddhist teachings begin with the phrase: "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are." Remember your fundamental dignity. Remember that you have the capacity for freedom, that within you is born the great heart of compassion. Trust it. Open to it. And then you can live with wisdom and bring your blessings to the world.

So, in honor of Ajahn Chah, I pass along these teachings.

Let's just sit for a moment. Be quiet.

You have the perfect conditions in your life for awakening the great heart of compassion. It is your birthright.

O nobly born, remember who you really are.

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