Loving Witness

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 45:27

So tonight I'd like to extend the teachings of our meditation on becoming the loving witness, the loving awareness, and talk about how we can manage ourselves, especially in these very challenging times.

At the end of our annual three-month retreat that we started some forty years ago on the East Coast at our center at Insight Meditation Society, we used to take a week at the end that we called integration week—to get people who had been silent for a long time prepared to go back into the complexity of their ordinary lives. We would show movies sometimes, and I remember renting this black and white documentary of a whole succession of speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King. Very, very moving. He would get up and begin to speak, and this incredible oratory would come out of him with so much vision and heart. He was really like a prophetic voice. And when he finished, sometimes he would fall back into the arms of the people around him, as if he had become a channel for something great—which was true.

I remember, as we all do, that famous statement where he said the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. I think of it in these times because they are difficult times. It's hard to witness and feel what's happening in Afghanistan—because it's part of us. It's hard with the newly released UN climate change report. We've known it, and yet it comes into our bodies and our spirits. It's hard with the pandemic and the delta variant. There are emotional responses of being worried or exhausted or languishing, or for some of us, grief and loss.

And how are we going to fix all of this? We better hurry up. Things are difficult.

I think of the story of a young, ardent man who came to a great Zen monastery and found the master and said, "I want to come in and practice. In this world, there's nothing I want more than enlightenment." The master nodded. The young man said, "If I really applied myself, if I practice, how long will it take me to get enlightened?" The master smiled back and said, "Give me ten years." The young man said, "But wait—I'm really on fire. If I'm really ardent and do it, then how long?" The master looked back and said, "In your case, probably twenty years." The man got agitated and upset. He said, "Why did you raise it from ten to twenty? I told you I would really do it." And the master said, "Yeah, in your case, maybe even thirty years."

What can you take from this story? Where are we going? What will we find when we get there? Some kind of promised land in the future?

With everything that's happening in the world and in our lives, should we be optimistic or pessimistic? The pessimists among us look out and see the suffering in Afghanistan and the struggle as the Taliban has taken over—people trying to get out, the loss of freedoms, particularly the vulnerability of the women,

and so many more things. The pessimists look at Syria and South Sudan and Myanmar and the rainforests in Brazil and in parts of the US that are losing so much. So much vulnerability, so many different forms of suffering. It's heartbreaking the way people mistreat each other. And if you look into the Buddhist texts in the cosmological sections, there are descriptions of the ends of empire on the earth with increasing disasters and shorter lives, natural disasters and human-made disasters. It's enough to make a pessimist out of almost anyone.

But then there's the optimistic side. This is not just a time of change in our lives, dear friends. It is really a time of transformation. If nothing else, the pandemic and climate change and the calls for racial and economic justice are showing us how completely interconnected we are. The young people in the world see it and know it. The great majority of the population of Africa and parts of India and China are young people, and they're filled with passion and hope for the future. There are all these possible breakthroughs in fusion power, medicine, agriculture—all kinds of human possibilities. And we are survivors. We've not only survived as human beings; we've taken difficulty and then made new leaps out of it.

So which is it? The poet Rilke calls it this life that faces both ways. Both ways. Because if you look really honestly, whether it's optimism or pessimism, you realize that they're only thoughts. They're only ideas. They're not the reality. We don't know, actually.

These are just views. And people who cling to their views, said the Buddha on many different occasions—those who are free let go of their views, and those who cling to their views move through the world annoying other people. It's one of my favorite little passages from the Buddha. And you know it, people who are really attached to the way they believe things should be.

But here we are, in this time, and it's not an easy time. We look back at the story that's told of the Buddha's enlightenment—seeking liberation, freedom, awakening. He took his seat under the Bodhi tree, the tree of enlightenment, and through that last night before enlightenment tried to steady his heart and quiet his mind and see deeply.

And as he did, as the story is told, Mara appeared. Mara is the name in Indian mythology of the god or being, the archetype, who represents all the difficulties of the world. And Mara came in many different forms.

As the Buddha sat there—and you've all heard this story—Mara arose first as temptations. Desires and needs, showing the Buddha all the things that he could have: Mara's most beautiful daughters, the most amazing food, all the possibilities. Don't you want something? All the things that we could want. And the Buddha sat and said, "I see you, Mara." With loving awareness, he became the witness to Mara appearing.

And Mara got frustrated and sent what are called the armies of Mara. There are these paintings and depictions of flaming arrows and swords and all of the armies of aggression and anger, seeking to knock the Buddha off his seat. And as it's painted, the Buddha holds up his hand—you see a line from his

fingertips going to his heart—and he touches each of the arrows and swords and spears as they come to him with the touch of compassion, and they turn into flower petals and fall at his feet.

And finally the Buddha sits quietly, and then Mara comes in the last form—the form of doubt. Self-doubt, doubt in the whole process. "Who do you think you are? What do you think you're doing? What do you think is possible? This world is the way that it is. There's no way for you to find freedom."

And again, finally, the Buddha touches the earth and says, "The earth is my witness. I've sat under this tree. I have practiced and practiced and practiced for this moment, to be present for it all. And I have no doubt." And the earth washed away the armies of Mara, and the doubt disappeared, and the Buddha's heart and mind became absolutely silent.

As the morning star was ready to set, the Buddha saw that all things are impermanent, that all things arise like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. He saw the evanescence of all things and found that the freedom was not to cling to any—to escape the snares of the king of death. As he said in a conversation later with Mogharāja on how not to be seen by the king of death: not to hold on to a single thing, to claim none of it as me or mine or identify with it. And instead, he became silent awareness itself, the witness to all things—both the vast stillness and the freedom beyond the whole sense of identity. He became freedom itself.

Now, the interesting thing in my experience as a teacher all these decades is that when I've led retreats—whether in Baltimore or Indonesia, Tucson or Switzerland, all these places around the world—one of the big surprises for people is that Mara appears everywhere. You sit down, minding your own business. "Okay, I'm going to sit and meditate, make myself calm and steady, see with clarity, bring compassion." And who appears? Guess who? Well, it's Mara again. Mara finds you wherever you go.

In fact, even after the Buddha's night of enlightenment, when you read the texts in the history, Mara kept coming back—fifty times Mara reappeared, testing the Buddha. And each time he would say, "Oh, Mara, is that you?"

Thich Nhat Hanh writes this beautiful account of the Buddha seated in a cave, quietly meditating, with his attendant Ānanda outside. And Mara—sometimes translated as "the evil one"—appears and begins to ask Ānanda, "I want to see the Buddha." And Ānanda says, "He's not here." And the Buddha hears the conversation and says, "Ānanda, is that my old friend Mara come round again?" And Ānanda didn't want Mara to come in, but he had to answer, "Yes, it is." And the Buddha said, "Set out a table. Let us have tea together."

And he invited Mara to tea. He said, "How is it going, Mara? How is it being the evil one?" Mara shook his head and said, "It's really tough. People hate me. I have a really hard job, inspiring everybody toward aggression and temptations and so forth." The Buddha was quite sympathetic and compassionate. He said, "You know, it's not even that easy being a Buddha, Mara. People distort my teachings. They want things

from me that I can't do. They have all these imaginations and fantasies that they put on me."

We both have tough jobs, don't we, Mara? Take some tea, Mara. I'll see you when you come back again.

So here we are, dear friends. We got ourselves in trouble, which is called the human incarnation. What Zorba the Greek called "the whole catastrophe." We got ourselves a life that has birth and death, praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow—the life of opposites. We got ourselves born into a world of unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears.

Take a breath.

Here we sit together to meditate, to become the loving witness, the loving awareness. It's so mysterious. We don't know quite how we got here, and we're only here for a short while, a brief while. The ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, praise and blame, gain and loss—they rise and fall in this human incarnation, ceaselessly.

So how do we live? How do we live wisely?

In any moment, you can become the loving witness. You can become loving awareness. It's why we sit in meditation. It's why we train—not to have a particular special amazing experience and hold your breath and hope it will last, but to sit with heartbreak and love and longing and fear and loneliness and sweetness and tenderness and anger. To step back. To put on that little half smile that Thich Nhat Hanh recommends as we meditate, the one you see on all those images and statues of the Buddha. To say, as Ajahn Chah, my teacher, used to say, "Oh, it's like this." Whatever arises—fear is like this. Loneliness is like this. Longing is like this. Hope is like this. We become the loving witness of it all. Spacious, caring, wise.

Now, you will be tried. Here we are with the spread of the Delta variant. People desperately, our children desperately needing to be back in school, even with masks. People wanting to go back to work. The flood of refugees as the oceans rise, as the temperature changes with climate change. The people around who don't vaccinate, the propaganda and untruth that spread around the world. You become the loving witness to all of that, yes.

And yet, it's also midsummer here in the northern hemisphere anyway. And the fruit is ripening. And the blueberries are sweet. And the blackberries hang heavy on the vine. I just recently went to a friend's house who had this amazing mulberry tree with these huge, long, sweet mulberries. And then the organic strawberries at our farmer's market, and five varieties of peaches, pluots and plums. What an amazing earth that brings us this bounty! How do we respond? What channel do you turn to amidst it all—amidst the joys and beauty and the sorrows?

This from Lee Horton. Among the two million people in our criminal justice system, he and his brother Dennis spent twenty-five years behind bars, accused of robbery and murder, sentenced to life without parole. They always maintained their innocence. And this year, after being locked up for a quarter of a

century, their case was reviewed finally, and they were granted clemency.

He talked about how amazing it was to come out and not have handcuffs put on him when he was in a car. And he said, "When they take everything away from you, I came out into this world and everything becomes beautiful." He continued, "When we got out, just to tell you a story—me, my brother, and another man who was commuted went to the DMV a couple of days later to get our driver's licenses back. We stood in line for two and a half hours, and we'd heard all the stories that everybody tells about the bad things about the DMV. We had the most beautiful time. And all the people were looking at us because we were smiling and we were laughing and they couldn't understand why we were so happy. It was just that—just being in line, standing at the DMV was a beautiful thing."

It was wonderful. I was in awe of everything around me. The things everyone takes for granted become the best things in the world for you. Having an onion just to cook your food becomes priceless.

He goes on and on about this. What channel will we choose? Because the world offers herself to us with an ocean of tears and its unbearable beauty every day.

Now, when I speak about Lee Horton, I think about my close and beloved relationship with Ram Dass—colleague, friend, teacher, inspiration. He tells a story from years ago when he was living at Millbrook in upstate New York. At that time, he was still in the Richard Alpert mode. He and Tim Leary had been kicked out of Harvard for giving LSD to undergraduate students, and he was going around talking about the psychedelic revolution and enacting it as they did at Millbrook.

He tells the story of dropping some acid, and then he needed to go somewhere—to the market or something. So he got in his big old car and got on the road, whatever it was, Route 9 that went near Millbrook. He started to drive along, and all of a sudden behind him he saw this flashing blue light from a police car. He knew enough, even though he was tripping, to pull over.

And this officer got out of the car with the blue light and walked over to him wearing a blue uniform. The state trooper. Ram Dass said, "I saw the blue light, and it was the same blue light that surrounds Krishna." When you look at all the beautiful images from India, especially baby Krishna, Krishna is surrounded by blue light. "And I saw this blue light come, and I knew it was the God Krishna who had stopped and come to visit me."

The officer came and Ram Dass lowered his window. He said, "I would have given him anything. This is a visit from God. What do you want?" And the officer said, "I want to see your license and registration."

So Ram Dass gave him his license and registration. "He thought," said Ram Dass, "that he was a state trooper, but I knew who he really was. I knew he was God." The officer gave him his license and registration back and told him that he'd been driving far too slowly. Apparently he was going twenty miles an hour on this highway, or fifteen. And then the officer looked at him so kindly and said, "Go on your way now, but make sure to pay better attention."

Ram Dass said, "And I got these teachings from God."

What channel do we tune in? There's something mysterious about this world, something amazing. It presents itself, and with mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, like Lee Horton, we can see it all anew—like the child of the spirit that was born in you. It's still there, underneath it all, to see with the eyes of amazement.

Mary Oliver's famous lines: "And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and sisterhood, and I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular. And each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth. When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement."

What a line. Married to amazement. And it is amazing. Take a breath. Remember.

And when we see with amazement, with loving awareness, we also see with the heart. Do you remember the story that I've told from past years about the rabbi in the woods?

It turns out that sometime long ago, there had been a great order of monastics, and all of these monastics who had spread out across the Christian lands had created temples of meditation and contemplation and prayer. But over the years, as modernization happened, the temples started to close and die out. People were less interested in going into monasteries. And so finally there was only one main mother house, one place where a handful of monks remained. There were only six of them left, and they were all in their seventies. They were a dying order.

It turned out that near the monastery there was also a special retreat center for the master rabbi, the mystic of that area from the Jewish tradition. And because the monks were quiet and listened, they could sometimes tell when the rabbi came into the woods.

They became despondent as everything was dying out, and they said, "Maybe we should send someone—our abbot—to go speak with the rabbi. He can give us some advice. Maybe he can help us, or at least understand us."

So the abbot went to the hut of this mystic and told him about the loss of so many other monasteries, and how now there was just this small group of them left. The rabbi kindly commiserated and said, "Yes, in these times, it's very difficult." And they sat down and prayed together. They read from the Torah. They read from their scriptures. They felt it was wonderful to see one another in this time and place, no matter what happens.

Have you no advice for us? the abbot asked the rabbi. He said, No, I really have no advice. But I have a vision that came to me, which I don't understand—that somehow the Messiah is with you. Maybe even one of you.

So the abbot of the old monastery went back. He pondered on what the rabbi had said. And he told the

other monks when they asked, What did he say? He said, The Messiah is one of us.

And in the months that followed, they all pondered these words. What could that mean? Could he have meant one of the monks here? The Abbot? If he meant anyone, probably Father Abbot. He's been our leader for a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod. Elrod gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's sides, when you look back at it, Elrod is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi meant Brother Elrod.

But surely not Brother Philip. Philip's so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did. Suppose I am the Messiah. Oh God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?

And as they contemplated in this manner over the weeks and months, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest where it was situated was beautiful, it happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery—to picnic on its lawn and wander some of the paths and go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of this place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it. And hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently—to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought their friends.

And then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. Sensing their beautiful respect and care for everything, after a while one asked if he could join. And then another, and another. And so within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order, thanks to the rabbi's gift. A vibrant center of life and beauty had arisen from the gift of reminding the monks who they really are.

What does it mean in this mystery to treat ourselves with that kind of respect, to treat one another with that kind of respect?

Now, one of the concerns I hear from my colleagues, out there in the spiritual industry—so to speak, of

which I am a part, embedded into the spiritual industry thing, which I can kind of look at now with some amusement and loving awareness—is the ruin of the loss of depth of what the tradition has. We had two-month retreats at Spirit Rock and three-month retreats at IMS and year-long trainings, monastic trainings that used to be so common in Thailand and Burma, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, where we received these beautiful teachings.

But more often than not, people are doing very short retreats. They've shrunk from three months and two months to ten days or a week or a weekend. And there's a certain loss of depth that happens. There's something amazing when you can come for ten days or longer and be silent, sit with your own body and heart and mind. Things open up. You can't even imagine if you've never done it. It's powerful and difficult at first, and amazingly beautiful.

And we see people at the end of retreats, and we like to talk about the meditative facelift. The Vipassana facelift.

Because people's eyes are shining at the end. There's a kind of smile and openness that's so beautiful to see.

But instead, now meditation has gotten shortened from one hour to thirty minutes or twenty minutes. And now I'm seeing the call for three-minute meditations. At the same time, some of the modern neuroscience coming out says that three minutes does a lot. If in your day you can take a few times for this sacred pause—this moment where you stop for three minutes and quiet and become the loving witness. "Oh, here I am caught up in this process at work. Here I am having to deal with this in my family. Here I am cooking, exercising. Here I am in the middle of paying my bills or caring for my garden or answering emails or watching the news." Let me take a moment—three minutes, one minute—to pause and step back and become the loving witness of life. Rest as loving awareness and say, "Well, this day, this moment with its joys and its sorrows, this is what I have to hold. This is the life I can give."

And in just a few breaths, our identity shifts from being caught in the difficulties and the struggles, the ambitions and problem-solving, the plans and memories and emotions—all those things we get identified with—to loving awareness. "Wow, look at this day! Look at this!" Like Lee Horton: "Look at this amazing day! Look at this line in the DMV! Wow, look at the berries and the summer fruit in a supermarket that has more food than any empire, any emperor or empress in previous thousands of years, would have had." What you have in your local supermarket would astonish them. Take some breaths and look at it all with the eyes of wisdom and a loving heart. Become that loving awareness itself. This is what you can do.

This is really the invitation to freedom. Yes, Mara will come, and you can say, "Oh Mara, is that you? I see you." But it's never too late to see with the eyes of mercy, to start anew exactly where you are—because where you are is always the place of freedom, again and again the invitation.

From the Tao: "I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your

greatest treasures. Simple in actions and thoughts, you return to the source of being. Patient with both friends and enemies, you accord with the way things are. Compassionate toward yourself, you reconcile with all beings in the world."

When you learn to sit in the midst of it, when you learn to say, "Oh Mara, is that you? I see you," when you learn to step back and become the loving awareness itself, the loving witness—then you become a model of how to live in this magnificent and troubled human incarnation. You bring your heart to what matters. And it's so clear: when people are hungry—I think it was the Pope who said—when there are people who are hungry, you pray for the hungry, and then you feed them. That's real prayer.

And where you go, you sow seeds of respect. You tend the neighborhood. You walk through this dusty world, as it's called, as the Buddha did for forty-five years, and you tend the garden of this world with your loving heart, with your stillness. You become the loving awareness itself that's not caught up and frightened and grasping.

For me, I'm on a lot of boards now—I think seven or eight boards of incredible organizations working with refugees, climate boards, the Regeneration Board of Paul Hawken that's extraordinary, education boards, the board of Partners Asia working with all the heartbreaking situations happening in Burma and Myanmar and countries around there—so many different organizations. And the people involved are so good-hearted. Part of what I bring—yes, I give money, I help connect people, I offer my own visions—but a lot of it as an elder is to sit in the seat of loving awareness and say, "Yes, we've been through this before. Yes, we human beings have suffered wars and environmental disasters, earthquakes and typhoons and tornadoes and pandemics in the past. And we know how to do this. We know how to hold hands. We know how to keep our hearts steady and calm. We know how to see that we're woven together in this mystery." And then we can respond. We can respond not with our fear or our ambition, not with optimism or pessimism—both of which are just ideas. We can respond with the heart.

I want to read you one more story, just to give you a sense of how playful you can be even in the midst of difficulty. And I've seen it. When those who are wise, those who meditate as we do and learn to center yourself—as the Tao said, to sit in that center of patience and simplicity and, more than anything, of love, of being the loving witness—then you get up and you work. You give your money, you join the organization, you tend the garden, you pick something that you care about. It's not your job to pick them all, but to pick one of them at least and offer your gifts and your service and your help.

"I'm ninety-two years old. I get up every morning at seven a.m. Each day I remind myself: wake up, get up. I talk to my legs. 'Legs, get moving. Legs, you're an antelope.'"

It's a matter of mind over matter when you're in your nineties. You have to get the spirit right. And I'm out on the street at 7:30 a.m. sharp, wearing my Honorable Sanitation Commissioner badge they gave me from City Hall. I'm alert. I'm ready. I've got my whistle.

My job is to help get parked cars off the street so they can bring in the sanitation trucks and the Wayne Broom—the big one, thirty grand for a broom. So when they show up, I go around blowing my whistle to get people to move their cars. I have a great time.

People are asleep. They're busy with business. They're busy taking time off from their business. They're busy having a good time. They're busy not having a good time. Whatever. I don't care. I blow my whistle. I'm all over the place.

I don't discriminate either. I go after the sanitation men too. The union got them a coffee break. Some coffee break. They're having eggs. They're having bacon. They're having toast. They're having French toast. I kid them about it. I go right into the restaurant and I blow my whistle. They love it. They understand. Everybody loves it. Everybody understands. It's the whistle that gets them. Sometimes I'm having such a laugh I can't even blow it. And then I get back to work. "Schleppers, get moving! Let's go move those cars."

This used to be such a beautiful city. People cared. If you didn't pay your rent, the sheriff would come and put your furniture out on the street. But the poorest of the poor would come out automatically and drop their pennies and nickels at your house and put you back into your apartment. That's neighborhood.

Now, sadly, it's different. Things have gone out of kilter. Hard to say why. People seem to be lost in their own lives. I see them on the streets, lost in their own thoughts. Not that I'm all that different myself. I'm a schlep myself. I've had many bad habits, as many as anyone. You should see my apartment—it's a mess. Me, Mr. Clean. But I'm trying.

Let's try. It's all possible. What can I tell you? I'm not a saint or a wise man. I'm not the two-thousand-year-old man. I'm only the ninety-two-year-old man, just a senior citizen.

But what do I know that everybody else doesn't know? We know. I just go out there in the morning and blow my whistle. That's what I do. And you do what you do. And me, I'm having a great time, a wonderful time. And when people see how much fun I'm having, they have to laugh. What else can they do? And then I hit them with it: Move your car.

I never met him, but I love his story. And it tells me something—and maybe you as well—that it's one thing to get caught up in our lives, as he describes in his own way. And then it's another thing entirely to realize that we do have a choice. A choice of which spirit, which channel we tune into. We can be the loving witness, the loving awareness. And then we can engage from that place in the world, with joy and openness, in spite of it all.

What better to do? What better? What better could we do with this life, with this mysterious incarnation?

Thank you, my friends. Thank you for listening. I'm so grateful. You know, when I give these talks, I give them as a kind of reminder for you. But you know who else I'm reminding, don't you? As Miss Piggy would

say: moi. This one here. These are ways that I remind myself to go out in the street with my whistle—or whatever I do as a meditation teacher. Instead of a whistle, I have my bell.

So thank you for listening. Thank you for your good hearts. Thank you that we get to remember together the spirit that's possible.

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