On Death | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 58:53

I'm glad we can be together this evening. The talk, which may be challenging in its own way, is going to be on death. That's its title: On Death.

Last time I talked about forgiveness, and we did a forgiveness practice. Next month, Thanksgiving month, I'd like to do some teachings on gratefulness and gratitude. Both of these—forgiveness and gratitude—are sweetness of the heart.

This is the month that has Halloween. You can see all the decorations in every store already, getting ready for Christmas probably right away after. The Day of the Dead. And also today is the holiday—remember, holiday means holy day—that was Columbus Day, now Indigenous Peoples Day. Both of these, the Day of the Dead and Halloween for sure, but also Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples Day, are woven together with birth and death.

Columbus Day was declared by Benjamin Harrison in 1892 as a result of the public lynching of eleven Italian men in New Orleans who were considered darker-skinned criminals because there had been a murder, and they were thrown into prison as possible suspects. Hundreds of people gathered and broke into the prison and hung them all. And of course, if we look at that as the origin of Columbus Day, we also have to look back at the Native American genocide. If it's Native American Day, yes, there is the celebration of all the things that are here in the native culture, but also the decimation and the suffering and the death that goes with it whenever we honor our natives, those who lived on this land for thousands of years before us. So these holy days are woven in with death itself.

And if we want to change the world, if we want to serve the world in some beneficial way, we have to face death.

Zen Master Rinzai, one of the greatest of the Buddhist Zen teachers of Japan, said: "Followers of the way"—that's you—"this one speaking right before you is a person who enters fire without being burned, goes into water without being drowned, and plays about in the three deepest hells as if in a fairground. Such a person enters the world of hungry ghosts and dumb animals without being molested or harmed by them. How is this so? Because there is nothing such a one fears or dislikes. Do not tire yourself by making up discriminations of what is right and wrong, struggling in the ocean of birth and death. Let yourself open to it all, and quite naturally of itself, you will find the way."

That's an amazing teaching. Goes into the worst and most painful experience as if in a fairground. Plays with the joys and sorrows, the praise and blame of the world of birth and death, with a clear mind, a

spacious mind, and an open heart.

Now, of course, this is not an easy thing to talk about. It's a heavy lift, because the truth is that we are profoundly challenged at this time. Collectively, we face climate change and the loss of species, the great movement to bring some healing for the suffering of racism and economic injustice, looking for social and economic and racial justice. We're in the throes of reimagining our culture in a healthier way. But right now we also face the suffering of it.

And then personally, we all know those who've had COVID. Almost three quarters of a million Americans—all those little white flags out on the lawn in Washington, D.C. in the mall. People who've died. Death.

It's a mystery. Did you think it wouldn't happen to you?

There's a story somewhere in the great Hindu teachings. Someone asked the God Krishna, "What are the most miraculous things on earth?" And Krishna answers with a few things and then says, "But the most miraculous of all is that people can see others getting sick and old, can see those dying around them, and think that it won't happen to them."

Did you think it wouldn't happen? asks the Buddha.

So how do we find a freedom of heart in this world, in this world of birth and death? How do we act and see it, see it deeply with the eyes of wisdom?

In Zen, this question of death is called the great matter. And they say: Practice ardently, for life is short. Find the answer to the great matter.

But we live in a culture that's really one of denial, that has lost its way. It's a culture focused on youth and whatever is smiling and sexy. Someone who wrote me a message before this talk said, "I hope you can speak to this poem by the great Chinese poet Han Shan, Cold Mountain." He writes: "Even if you store up rhinoceros horn, wear a tiger's eyeball, drive away evil with a peach branch, or make a garlic necklace, even if you warm your belly with dogwood wine or drink wolfberry soup to empty your mind, in the end, you cannot avoid death."

And here we are in our modern form—the keto diet and eating just kale, or the people into the cryo-freezing of their body and brain, hoping that they will somehow be able to revive it in future centuries. Or the ones who are looking to artificial intelligence to download their brain into, or those who are buying an underground bunker in some house in New Zealand. All the ways that we might hope to avoid death.

Not likely.

There's a truth that's bigger than all of this, and our heart knows it. All is subject to change. All is subject to

birth and death. This is tonight's talk on wisdom. The other night's forgiveness, gratefulness, or the heart talks of love. This is wisdom. All is subject to arising and passing, subject to birth and death.

My dear colleague Michelle McDonald, who has taught retreats for many, many years at the Insight Meditation Society and still does, would work with kids as well as a teacher. She described how she was working with kindergarteners or preschoolers, age four or five, and talking about death because they were interested. Kids are interested. How does this world work? They'd heard about grandparents dying or pets dying. So she said, let's together understand this. And she sent them out into the woods around the school where they were to look for anything they could find that had died. They came back in with handfuls of dead leaves and twigs and branches. Somebody even found a little piece of a skeleton, maybe of a squirrel that had died. All these different things—dead seeds and plants. And they made a pile of them and began to talk about it.

Then at one point she asked them, "Well, what would happen if there wasn't death?" And one of the wise little ones there, some wise little girl, said, "Well, then nothing would go away. There'd be more and more trees and more and more things. And there'd be no room for us." Because the ending of things is also the beginning of something new. Each end allows for the arising of something else.

The Buddha was approached by a man who said, as they usually ask, "Are you a Buddha? Are you a blessed one, a wise one, an enlightened one?" The Buddha nodded. The man said, "I have a question for you. How is it that we may practice or live so that we are not seen by the king of death?" Now there's a great question. How is it to live and practice so we are not seen by the king of death?

And the Buddha answered, "When you do not cling to anything as I, as me, as mine, then you will not be seen by the king of death."

What does this mean? This means to shift our attention, our locus of presence, of identity, from being identified with our role or our body or our place or whatever it happens to be, to be the loving witness. The witness of gain and loss, praise and blame, grief and joy, pleasure and pain. To be the mindful, loving witness of this dance of life—for this is who you are.

Now, of course I say this, and then you say, "Well, how do I live this in practice?" And it's not really so simple, is it? Because here we are in these bodies with our lives.

I remember when I'd first come back from practicing in the monasteries and I'd had long retreats and deep meditations—more than a year in silence in one little hut, living in the ascetic practice monastery in the forest. I was driving on the Massachusetts Turnpike, the freeway there, a couple months after I'd been back. As I was driving down the Massachusetts Turnpike, a truck a couple hundred yards ahead of me—a big truck—lost part of a tire. It flung into the air and smashed into a car that was following it. That car swerved off the road and other cars braked suddenly to avoid crashing into it. And I wasn't very far behind them. It was really clear that I could crash into them and could die.

My mind, from all those months and years of meditation, had a great equanimity and peace to it. I could feel, "Ah, look at this—this might be the day I might die." But I was so peaceful in the midst of it, just noticing, just the awareness.

But that's only part of the story, because then in my body rose this huge wave of adrenaline, and my hands gripped the wheel, and my body said, "Oh no, you're not gonna die," and wrenched the car over into the side of the road and into the grass to stop and avoid crashing.

It's as if there were these two dimensions, because we live in multiple dimensions. One part of me so at ease with it all from all those months and years of practice, and another part holding on—not now, not yet.

We live in these multiple dimensions. We cherish life.

And yet also we have to let go. As Mary Oliver writes, to live in this world, you must be able to do three things. To love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones as if your life depends upon it. To love what is mortal, hold it against your bones. And when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. These three things.

Larry Rosenberg, a wonderful teacher, wrote a book called *Living in the Light of Death*. What does death have to teach us? When it is, as Carlos Castaneda and his teacher Don Juan expressed, when it's taken as an advisor—to take death as an advisor, death constantly there over your left shoulder, reminding you of the brevity of life.

In the monastery, I sat in the charnel grounds when bodies were being burned through the night, watched the body go into ashes. We did meditations on death. We watched the decay of the body. And as I sat and went deep in meditation, I also had these amazing experiences—out of the body experiences where my consciousness floated out of my body. My body was still sitting there and I could look out the window of the little hut I was in and see things that were happening. And I realized, wow, I'm not this body. My body would dissolve into vastness, dissolve into light. Things would arise and disappear. The whole world would disappear and reappear. And I began to see from the quietest, deepest place that who we are is a play in consciousness, is a play of consciousness. On one level, we're born into this body. A spirit comes, consciousness comes into this body. You're not your body. You're not your feelings or thoughts. You are the consciousness inhabiting this body.

I've talked about sitting with my father when he was dying in the hospital. He was really terrified. He was a scientist who believed in physical matter, and I asked what he thought about death and he said, "You turn into dirt, there's nothing else." And he was so frightened, he kept looking at the monitors behind him in the ICU to see if he had died yet. He didn't want that to happen with no one to notice. So when I asked him what happens, he said, "Nothing, you turn into dirt." I said, "Well, that could be, but you're a scientist. Maybe you should take it as an experiment."

And I told him about dissolving my body into light, about having out of the body experiences, about

memories of past lives. I've done past life regressions for people around the world. Some believe, some don't, but it's amazing—half of them, even the non-believers, have these extraordinary experiences of past lives. I talked about sitting with people in hospice and having them begin to come close to death and leave their body and then come back—near death experiences, describing going out into light. I said, "So maybe you'll turn into dirt, but it's very possible that you'll find yourself floating out of your body, looking down, maybe reflecting, 'Wow, that was an incarnation, wasn't it? That was an amazing life.'" And I said, "Remember, if it happens, I told you so. Pay attention."

On another level, Ramana Maharshi, the great Indian sage, when he was dying of cancer and a student said, "Don't leave me, don't leave me," looked back with such tenderness and said, "But where could I go?" For on a deeper level, the whole sense of death is an illusion.

Here is Thich Nhat Hanh—today is his 95th birthday—our sage and elder and amazing being. He says: "This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I'm life without boundaries. I've never been born and I've never died. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of consciousness, a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again soon. We meet today and tomorrow. We meet at the source of every timeless moment."

We meet each other in all forms of life.

I remember sitting with Thich Nhat Hanh a few years ago after his stroke. He could not speak. He was getting ready to leave. He'd been in San Francisco for a while, taken care of by Mark Benioff, with a whole cadre of monks and nuns. And he looked around on the last morning before he left at those of us sitting with him, with two eyes—one in which he could see each person, and he nodded to them. He looked at me, he looked at Trudy, he looked at us, acknowledging that we'd known each other in this amazing dance. And the other eye was focused on eternity. You could feel the timelessness as he gazed at us.

This is the reality. As Kalu Rinpoche says, when you understand, you'll see that you are nothing—and being nothing, you are everything. You are the play of consciousness, and this is what gives you freedom.

Beyond all the roles you have as a woman or a man or whatever your identity might happen to be, your roles at work, your roles as a child or a parent or whatever role you might take—you know this. You know you're not your roles. You switch. You come home from work and if you have a family, they don't see you as the worker; they see you as the sister or brother, son or daughter, partner or lover. They're all tentative. Who are you underneath it all? This is the question.

Well, all right. We sit back, we become the loving witness. We realize that everything changes and rises and falls. We find a place of equanimity, of the peaceful heart, the timelessness in the midst of it all.

Ha—not so easy, really.

About a dozen years ago, I started to have much wilder tremors than I have now. They've really quieted down a lot since then. But I passed out a couple of times in front of big groups of people, and something was clearly going wrong in my body, along with all kinds of other symptoms. I got tested in every way you can—scanned and examined and so forth. And then I got misdiagnosed.

I went to see this physician, and he said, "This is happening quickly." He watched me and heard the symptoms and described some disease kind of like ALS but not the same, and that it was going to happen fast. My body was deteriorating, and I nodded—I could feel it. And then he said, "Oh yes, and with this, you will lose your memory and you'll find yourself in dementia."

That was not in my program. I was maybe ready to die, but I wasn't ready to lose my awareness and end up demented, unable to even remember anything. And this huge wave of fear came up. I thought I was good with death, sitting in the charnel grounds, envisioning my own death, being at peace with it all. But when it came to "Okay, you're dying soon with dementia and everything else"—I got terrified. I was surprised at how fast and big it was. It took some days to start to come to terms with it. And then I found out it was a misdiagnosis, and I'm actually fine for now. It's all for now, you know, isn't it? Karma, they say, changes like the swish of a horse's tail.

And at seventy-six, Trudy and I look at each other very lovingly and say, "Wow, seventy-six is a pretty big number." Here we are—healthy and loving and together and happy—but that tail will swish. It will happen.

I remember going to talk with Ram Dass sometime after that. I told him, "I thought I was chill with death, and then I got this misdiagnosis—dementia and all this—and I got really frightened." And he smiled, he laughed. He said, "Oh yeah, I flunked the course a number of times."

But he was so gracious at that point, so spacious. He had become really ready to die, to drop his body, as they say. He and Mirabai Bush, dear friend and teacher, worked on this wonderful book called *Walking Each Other Home*. And he became so spacious about it. He said, "Dropping your body, leaving this body, is like taking off a tight shoe." For him, he had twenty-some years in a very painful and increasingly disabled body. So you could hear it—he was ready.

But this is the reality.

As it says in the texts, a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. All things appear for a time. It seems like we'll be here forever. And then this great mystery, which is here—as Don Juan says, death is stalking us, which is what makes life so precious and alive—that it will happen.

And whenever someone close to us dies, or whenever we approach death, something remarkable starts to happen. You know this. The gates between the worlds open. And you start to feel the sense of mystery. Like it all seems so solid—I know who I am, I have my world—and yet, and yet, it will all be gone.

There's a recent book by a friend and dharma practitioner entitled *At Heaven's Door* by William Peters. He had started at Zen Hospice some twenty years ago, and he was sitting in the hospital with a man, a hospice patient, holding his hand as his last breath began to happen and his spirit began to leave his body. William said the amazing thing was that he could feel himself going with him. Not only did this man leave his body, but he left his body too. He didn't even know it was the man's last breath, but they were there floating above their bodies in a realm of space and light. And then he came back, he said. It really touched him that he'd gone a little way with this man he was sitting with and holding his hand.

The book is about what he calls SDEs. You've heard of NDEs, near-death experiences. These are shared death experiences. And many of us have had them.

I was sitting with Marlene Jones, who was one of my dear friends and a teacher at Spirit Rock. She'd been in a coma for a week. She'd had heart failure. Her brain was flatlined. She'd had a long time without oxygen. Nothing was functioning, no response. Everything was tried to bring her back—not possible. And finally her family decided they had to take her off life support.

I was holding her hand and I said, "Dear Marlene, if you can hear me"—people in a coma can, you know—I said, "It's too soon. I'll so miss you. You've been such a light for all of us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." And as I said it, two tears rolled down her cheeks. Nothing—the doctors had probed and shouted and touched and tried to get a response from her for a week, brain dead, zero. But those few words, so mysterious.

I tell the story of being with my beloved sister-in-law, Esther, as she was dying of cancer, coming back and forth to her house. It was very close. I was with her and my brother. I got up one morning right toward the end of her life, hurried to get down to be near her. But I had to stop and pick up some medicine at the drugstore. I was rushing through CVS, and all of a sudden, as I approached the checkout counter, my whole body changed. I relaxed and I thought, I felt, I sensed—oh, Esther died. I got to my car and called my brother. He said, "Oh, I'm glad you called. Esther died five minutes ago." And I knew it. Just as I, and people I was with, knew the surprising death by accident of people halfway around the world when I was living in Asia. How could we know?

When I teach in person, I ask the group how many have had this kind of experience where you've known something at a distance—that someone died, that you've lost someone. And a third of the hands go up. How could this be?

It's because, dear ones, we are not this body. We're not limited to the sense of the small self, as it's called, the separate self.

We are a life connected with it all, living through this unique body. But halfway around the world, because we are consciousness itself, we can know.

I was holding hands with my father as he was dying. And after he died, we were in Philadelphia—my

mother and my three brothers and I—emptying his little apartment. His life had shrunk down. What are we going to do with all his things? There wasn't that much left. But he'd been a tyrant. Yes, he'd been a kind of compelling and brilliant scientist who developed some of the first heart-lung machines and worked in space medicine. But he was also a wife batterer, given to almost mentally ill, violent, paranoid fits throughout his life.

We asked the superintendent if there was a Salvation Army nearby where we could give the furniture. And the superintendent said, "Well, next block over, there's a battered women's shelter." We all just started to smile—the perfect justice of it.

We were staying at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel, this big suite, the four brothers and my mom. And I had a dream the next night. My father came to me. I don't dream about him particularly, but there I was. He came in my dream and looked kind of confused. I said, "Dad, Dad, I'm so glad to see you. It's so touching to see you after what happened." He looked at me confused. "What happened?" I said, "Yes, I'm here with Mom, your ex, and my brothers. What happened is you died." He stared at me as if very confused. I said, "You died, Dad." He nodded as if digesting this. Then without a word, he turned his head and walked away and faded out.

People die in character. Some resist, some in fear, some in love, some let go more easily than others.

There's a story in Frank Ostaseski's wonderful book called *The Five Invitations*. He writes about all his years helping to found Zen Hospice and his hospice work. He tells about a man, a gay man named Matthew, who'd been raised in a fundamentalist Christian family. Commandments had been beaten into him by his fire-and-brimstone preacher of a father. He felt certain that God would condemn him for eternity to hell due to his sexual orientation. So Matthew had become a Buddhist to step out of the church and all the condemnation. They created an altar by his bedside with a beautiful healing thangka and a Buddhist statue.

But he was having a really hard time. Frank said, "I began to chant with him. I held his hand, massaged his feet, played his favorite music. Nothing worked." Because Matthew had spun into a world of confusion and shame and dread that somehow he was going to meet this condemning God and be condemned for eternity for being gay.

By two in the morning, Frank said, he was exhausted. He drove home to get some sleep. And as he was driving, he remembered his first holy communion, the Catholic ritual that ushers young innocents into the loving lap of God. When he got home, he searched through his mementos of childhood and located this plastic figurine of Jesus surrounded by lambs and little children. And instead of going to bed, he drove back to the hospital.

As Matthew continued to shout and toss and turn in agony, Frank took down the thangka and Buddha statue and replaced it with the statue of Jesus. Just as he was smoothing the altar cloth, the night cleaning

woman named Dina came into the room and spotted the figurine. Setting her mop to one side, she said with great enthusiasm, "Merciful Jesus! When his kindness is with us, everything is right."

At once Matthew's eyes locked onto Dina. An angelic smile spread across his face as he pivoted toward the altar to gaze at the plastic Jesus statue and the lambs and children around him, then back in Dina's direction. His whole body relaxed. In that moment, the punishing God of Matthew's childhood—the one whose wrath he'd been told to fear, whose judgment made him feel like a terrible person—was transformed into the merciful God he also knew and loved. The one who adored all his children, no matter their so-called faults and flaws. A kind, forgiving, all-accepting and benevolent, loving God. Dina's faith in God's love was so secure that it gave Matthew exactly the strength he needed to release his inner pain and self-condemnation.

I left them there together to get some rest. They no longer needed me.

As bodhisattvas—those of you who practice the life of compassion to reduce suffering for yourself and for all those around you, that's you, you bodhisattvas—we are always at the bedside of birth and death, of beginnings and endings, of impermanence. This is our role: to be with all things that change with an open heart.

I think of my friend Houston Smith, who was a great philosopher, teacher, and religious figure. He was a professor of religion at MIT and wrote this book on the religions of the world, one of the great bestsellers. Houston told this tragic story: his granddaughter, only twenty years old, was killed in some adventure she'd taken with someone else, killed in some terrible way. People tried to comfort him, sending messages and talking to him. He was heartbroken. The grief was just so big, so stupendous for him to carry, even as a wise old sage. This was his beloved granddaughter.

Later he said, "The person who helped me most in that time of despair and grief was a young man who lived two doors down the street from us. He was a Native American man. When I would sit out, he would come over onto the porch and sit next to me and hold my hand and say nothing." And that, he said, was the deepest and greatest comfort.

Mindful, loving presence in the birth and death, the arising and passing, the beginning and ending of things. They will begin and end. They are all impermanent. We will have our emotional reactions, but the mindful loving presence opens us to that which is timeless.

I think of working with Michael Meade and Luis Rodriguez in these retreats for young men from the gangs, getting out of the gangs in Oakland and Chicago and Los Angeles. These were kids who'd been brought up in terrible circumstances of poverty and racism and lack of opportunity. They joined a gang to find a family. But of course, there was the undeclared war on the streets. So many people died. And these were the kids trying to leave the life, leave the gang life, brought with mentors who took them to our retreats to find another way.

At the end of the time together, we made a ritual, a ceremony. I brought with me fifty skull malas, those 108 beads with tiny skulls. They look like Halloween adornments, but they're Tibetan, of course—you've seen them, remembering death. We created this ritual for them after working so deeply together—storytelling and grieving and understanding and compassion, helping them see that they were not limited, not defined by their trauma. They were not defined by what had happened to them, that who they are was bigger than that. They had a free spirit.

Each one was given a blessing, the mala was put around them, and a chant was done by the whole group of young men and older men: "This is a man who has faced death, a young man who has faced death, and now chooses life."

You will meet death in personal ways—illness, loss, death of those around you, grief, the end of work, the divorce that's unexpected, people around you that leave, all the endings of things.

I remember leading retreats with Steven Levine, colleague and dear friend, retreats on death and dying. Steven would peer out after some days of our heart work together, and he would say, "Suppose this was the last week. Suppose this was the last day of your life." This was really touching and moving because it was during the time of the AIDS epidemic. We had lots of young men who had come on these retreats. There was no cure yet at that time.

"Suppose this was your last week, your last day. Who would you call? What would you say? And why are you waiting?"

Everyone got quiet to reflect on this.

To face death, to see that everything arises and passes, to take your seat in the middle of this world, like the bodhisattva or Buddha that you are, and to meet what comes and goes with a wise and tender heart—this is the great medicine that's needed.

I remember the story of Gary Snyder being interviewed by our colleague and dear friend Wes Nisker some years ago. Gary, I think, must be in his nineties now. He had written *Earth House Hold* and a number of amazing books about care for the earth, as a Zen teacher and as an environmentalist. He received the Pulitzer Prize for his work, trying to wake us up fifty years ago to being embedded in the environment in which we live and how we care for it.

And so Wes asked Gary, you look out now, you see the loss of species, the rising oceans, the desertification, bigger hurricanes, the ravages of climate change and the things that are happening in this world—what message do you have for us?

And Gary sat quietly and looked back from the place of wisdom and age and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt. Or anger. Or fear. Those are what cause these problems. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it. Save it out of love."

Love—the power that has mothers lift cars off their children. Love—the power that can change anything. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it.

And this is what living in the light of death offers us—of birth and death, of change, of gain and loss and praise and blame and success and failure, of tragedy and rebirth. We get to bring the great medicine of love.

And in that love, there's also a trust that suffering is not the end of the story. It's only the First Noble Truth. There are causes of greed and hatred, fear and anger—we can see this. But there is also a liberation, a freedom of heart in the midst of it all, and a path to liberation: loving awareness itself, mindfulness, compassion.

I remember being in a refugee camp. Refugees fleeing, as they often do, some of the worst tragedies you can imagine, everything being lost. And yet the kids in the camp, the five and six and seven year olds, eight year olds—they'd taken the milk cans that the UN brought and offered. After the milk was poured out, they punctured the side of them and put little sticks in the cans, then made handles for them and created these little carts. They were doing races and running around with their milk can cars and carts, unable to be stopped—their creativity and their laughter and their joy and their love.

Suffering is not the end of the story.

And we as the wise ones, as the Bodhisattvas, can rest in a timeless place of trust, unafraid to love well, no matter what's happening. Yes, death is an advisor, and it gives a clarity to us of what really matters.

But then, as the great Bodhisattva, as Master Rinzai whom I read about in the beginning: "You who are followers of the way, you can enter the world"—all of the world, its tragedies and its unbearable beauty—"with gift-bestowing hands," with an open heart, with a fearlessness that says, "Yes, this is life. This is samsara. This is existence as a human being. All things change."

And who we are is the loving witness, the consciousness itself, the witness to it all, the timeless awareness. We are the ancestors, soon enough, of the future generations—not just seven generations, but thousands of generations that are in the earth under our feet, and what we will join and be under the feet of the next generations.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *No Death, No Fear*, describes missing his mother after she died. He was living in his monastery in North Vietnam and went out one night after having had a dream of her, like I dreamed of my father. He was missing her so much, and he began to walk between the tea plants under the moonlight. And all of a sudden he had this profound realization that his mother was with him, that she had never left, that her dying was just her body, but not who she really was.

He said, "And she became the moonlight caressing my skin. And I realized she was still with me, and I realized my body, which had been inside her, was her body too. And together, as I took my steps, I could

feel that it was her feet as well as my feet, leaving footprints in the damp soil in the moonlight."

There's a freedom. You know this. There are moments when you look back and say, "Wow, that was an intense thing I lived through. That was difficult. This is hard. That was wild. That was amazing." But the experiences are not who you are. Who you are is the one who knows, says Ajahn Chah. The consciousness, the witness to it all.

And as the Bodhisattva, you rest in vastness and a loving heart. And you can say, "Wow, what an amazing incarnation this has been." And you don't have to wait until the death of your body to see it that way. Because here we are in this mystery. And your identity will disappear in some way. But it doesn't matter, as Thich Nhat Hanh says: "This body is not me. I am life without boundaries."

I am life itself. I have never been born and I have never died.

To end, I want to read you what I consider a holy text. You all know this sutra, or most of you do. It's one of Mary Oliver's poems—she who has been one of our greatest poets, the Whitman of our time, perhaps. The poem is called "When Death Comes." You know it. Let it speak to your heart again.

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn, when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me and snaps the purse shut. When death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades, I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness? And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, and I look upon time as no more than an idea and consider eternity another possibility. 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 this earth. When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms. When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I'd made of my life something particular and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

A bride married to amazement.

Take a breath. Rest in the mystery. Yes, you love and tend this body and this life you've been given. And yet—and yet you also know: like a star at dawn and a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a phantom, a rainbow, a dream.

Let your heart be open and free and wise, to say yes. I can love it all.

I did a Sufi dance at Lama Foundation, one of Murshid Samuel Lewis's dances—Sufi Sam. I used to think they were kind of hokey, but they're really beautiful. There was an outer circle and an inner circle, and as we rotated to a certain rhythm, guitar playing and chanting, we would meet each person and chant and bow to them: *I love it when it comes. And I love it when it goes.* Then there would be a silence and some music, and the next person would appear. *I love it when it comes. And I love it when it goes.*

You are love. Fearless, timeless, open, loving awareness itself. Rest in it. Trust this. You'll see—as I said to my father, you wait and see.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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