Gratitude and Generosity Dharma Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 46:46

How do we practice gratitude and generosity in these times, in the midst of all of this? The pandemic—well, we can also be grateful for the vaccines that have been developed. The climate crisis—and maybe we can also be grateful that nations are beginning to come together for what we need. The cries for social and racial and economic justice, all of these things.

Our dear elder and sage, Joanna Macy says the world is not a problem to be solved. It is a living being to which we belong. We are part of this living being—its beauty, its suffering. And our current problems seem almost orchestrated to bring forth from us the biggest moral strength, courage, and creativity in our hearts. I feel that when things are this uncertain and difficult, a person's determination, how we choose to care, to invest our energy with our heart and mind, can have a much greater effect on the larger picture than usual. So I also find it an exciting time to be alive. Here we are in the midst of it.

Somebody asked Ramakrishna, the great Indian saint, why there is evil in the world. And he replied, "To thicken the plot." You wouldn't go to the movies if it was all just everybody smiling. It had to be there to thicken the plot.

The Buddha, however, never answered those kinds of questions—why, where did it come from? Those were philosophical questions. He just said, "What I teach is simple. There's suffering in human life and its causes: greed, hatred, fear, attachment. And there's a path to the end of it, to a freedom. This is what I offer you—how to pass through the difficulties of human life and find that which is free and compassionate and beautiful in your own heart." This is the offering of the Dharma.

He trusted somehow that people would find their way, individually and collectively. He created a big community and worked with the leaders of the communities of his time, trusting that we as human beings can find a way to live more wisely, more compassionately, more generously and graciously.

The whole monastic order is founded on trust. The way the rules work, especially in the Theravada tradition where our teachings come from—Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka and India and Burma, Thailand—the rule for monks and nuns is that you may not eat anything that was not offered and placed into your hands that very morning. You cannot store food. You cannot grow food. You cannot cook your own food. You have to go out with your alms bowl, or you wait until someone comes to your temple, and you eat what's offered to you.

It was an amazing experience as a monk in the remote parts of Thailand, on the border of Laos, to go out in these very simple and poor villages at dawn and have people waiting to take of the little food they have

and place it in your bowl. They would stand silently, reverently, as if to say, "We so value what you carry in our society—the teachings of compassion and freedom. We so value this that we want to share of the little food that we have, even in the poorest seasons and households."

It was an amazing experience to feel that level of generosity, that level of gratitude, and that level of trust. Because you had to trust that you would get enough to eat. And almost always we did. Once in a while we didn't, and so be it. Then the next day we might. But the whole integrated field of Dharma is built on a love and a care and a trust between human beings.

Years ago, I was invited to a big conference at the Menninger Foundation in the Midwest. It was a conference on the nature of consciousness. All the neuroscientists and researchers were there, the usual suspects. And there was an Iroquois medicine man who came and attended. His name was Mad Bear.

When it was his turn to address the assembled conference, he said, "Come out with me to the prairies, to the plains." We went out with him and stood, and he stood up and for forty-five minutes or an hour, he made a prayer. Now that is one darn long prayer, I've got to tell you. I started to get a little bored, a little impatient. Okay, it's nice to have a prayer—when is he going to finish?

The prayer was a prayer of gratitude. He thanked the grasses. He thanked the heads of the cereal grains that grow. He thanked the earthworms and the beetles on the earth and the ants—all that kept the soil moving and moist and open so things could grow. He thanked the birds that flew by and the birds that we didn't see. He thanked the wind and the colors in the sky. He went on and on.

Pretty soon, even to my slightly impatient and irritated consciousness, I realized that this was a gorgeous mindfulness meditation. It was a meditation on gratitude. It was a practice of connecting and engaging with loving awareness all the things around us. And it changed us when we went back into the room.

The Iroquois nation, who offered so many brilliant visions to the founders of the American Republic—there's a lot of history about that—they also had a beautiful way of teaching their children generosity. As I understand it, part of their tradition was to take children when they were three, four, five years old and place them in the center of a circle. First, they would give them beautiful things to drink. Then someone on the outside of the circle would cry out, "I'm thirsty! I'm thirsty! I have nothing to drink!" And the child who had been given so much would say, "Oh, come in! You come in. Let me share my drink with you."

Then they would give the child all kinds of beautiful things to eat. And from outside the circle, a voice: "I'm hungry, I haven't had anything to eat, help me." The child would be encouraged and guided to say, "Oh, there's so much food here, please come partake, please come share, come have some of my food." Then they would wrap the child in warm skins and woven things, and someone would shout, "I'm cold, I'm freezing!" And the child would offer these warm things to them. What a way to raise children—to have that sense of abundance that can be offered.

Now, my three-year-old grandson went out on Halloween this time. It was his first time really understanding it. His mother was pretty savvy because she didn't want him to have this enormous pile of candy that wasn't all that good for him to eat day after day. So, kind of like the Iroquois, he went around—I mean, there's this mysterious thing where you go from one place to another. Talk about a Buddhist alms bowl! He has his little alms, his Thanksgiving pumpkin, this plastic pumpkin that he puts stuff in. And everywhere he goes, people are giving him the best thing he could imagine: candy.

But then his mother explained something. She said, "The way this holiday works"—this was rather clever, I thought—"is you get all this candy and then you wait by the door, and other children come by, and you get to give it to them." So he had this whole big pile of candy, and then he waited, and as the older kids came later, he got to give the candy out to them. He took as much delight in giving it away as he did in receiving it.

In the Buddhist tradition, it says you become a fully awakened Buddha after practicing these great ten perfections for one hundred thousand mahakalpas—a few immensities, these enormous, vast lengths of time. And one of the first of these perfections is the perfection of generosity.

Well, I don't think this is a really useful framing. One hundred thousand mahakalpas, each of which lasts longer than an eon on earth, where you're trying to become more and more patient, more and more generous. How am I doing? "Okay, I've gotten through thirty-four thousand nine hundred kalpas..." The whole notion of progress in that way in spiritual life—some goal out there—can be really problematic for us. As Aldous Huxley said, an idolatrous religion is one that substitutes time for eternity. Some goal, some place you're supposed to be, rather than the eternal present.

But there's another way to understand generosity, and that is as fundamental abundance—that this is who you are. As Rumi says, you, the richest person in the world, could give it all away. Why don't you do this? To awaken to a sense of wellbeing that is your birthright.

Here's a poem from David Whyte called "Everything is Waiting for You":

Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone, as if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witnesses to the hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely even you at times have felt the grand chorus crowding out your solo voice. You must know the way the soap dish enables you, or the window latch grants you freedom. The stairs are your mentor of things to come. The doors have always been there to frighten you and invite you. And the tiny speaker in the phone is your dream ladder to new identities and divinity. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and see the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I could kind of stop right here. Just this as an invitation and a reflection.

We have this remarkable, marvelous human incarnation with all its sorrows and losses, and with its unbearable beauty and magnificence. Open. Become that loving awareness, the loving witness. You are the consciousness that gets to delight in and suffer through all these things—this human incarnation—and see it all.

And you know that you're not just this body, or these fleeting thoughts or feelings. Who you are is so much bigger—not the small self that we take ourselves to be. You are so much bigger than this.

And it comes out the moment a child falls and is in danger in the street. Everybody leaps to try to get that child out of the way. Why is that? Because deep down, we belong to each other, and we know it.

If you look at the military, the stories are not about the great bravery of soldiers for some ideal, whatever flag they're carrying. They really do the brave things they do because they love their comrades and want to take care of their brothers and sisters. We belong to each other.

Here, a story:

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a veterans affairs hospital. The work was a challenge in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I think they could sense I'm a lesbian. My growing discomfort with their questions seemed only to egg them on.

Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since he had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward, where some patients could become argumentative, even angry and aggressive. I sometimes didn't feel quite safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a threatening manner. Just as I was starting to worry, an equally large Vietnam vet with dementia quietly came in between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere. They stood nearby in silence, and I felt safe.

I've retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

We belong to each other. And something in us knows this and wants to help each other.

Every morning after alms round in the monastery, we would do our morning chants—sometimes before we went out, some of them when we came back. They were chants of gratitude and prayers: May I use the food that's offered, the robes that I've been given, the care that I received from others. May I use this in a way that benefits myself and the community around me and all beings in this world. May I receive this with deep gratitude.

Gratitude. The acknowledgment of the countless blessings, great and small, that we receive every single day—with every breath, every meal. Gratitude has a trust, a confidence in life itself. It feels the same force that pushes grass through cracks in the sidewalk, that invigorates and keeps you alive every day.

Gratitude gladdens the heart. It's not sentimental, not jealous, not judgmental. It doesn't envy or compare. Gratitude receives in wonder the myriad offerings of the rain and the earth and the care that supports every single life.

Here is a meditation on gratitude:

With gratitude, I remember the people, animals, plants, insects, creatures of the sky and sea, air and water, fire and earth—all whose joyful exertions bless my life every day.

With gratitude, I remember the care and labor of a thousand generations of elders and ancestors who came before me.

This is a Zen prayer, by the way.

I offer gratitude for the safety and well-being I've been given.

I offer gratitude for the blessings of this earth I'm given every day.

I offer gratitude for the measure of health I've been given.

I offer gratitude for friends and family and community I've been given.

I offer gratitude for teachings and lessons, and for the life that has been bequeathed to me.

As Brother David Steindl-Rast says, it's not joy that makes us grateful.

It's gratefulness that makes us joyful. Maya Angelou captured this beautifully: "This is a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before." That innocence, that beginner's mind.

Several of my friends and colleagues—teachers that you know, I won't use their names—have become gratitude buddies for each other. At the end of a day, they will text their gratitude buddy: "Here are three things that I'm grateful for today." It starts to tune the heart, to begin to look and notice—oh yes, this and this and this.

There's a whole form of therapy in Japan called Naikan therapy that was designed for people who are depressed or anxious or neurotic. Basically, you go on a retreat and begin to reflect on everything that you've been given in your life—from your very first breath and your first diaper and the first milk that you were given, whatever baby food—how much abundance has come into you, and that you are part of this abundance.

Now, let's be real about it. It's not that easy. We all have periods that are extremely hard. We face our own

fears and illnesses and confusion and aging and conflicts in our family. And then all this stuff that I talked about that's so present in the culture and in the world—the conflicts.

In Tibet, those who practice meditation offer a prayer to receive suffering: "Grant that I may be given enough suffering that my heart will open and find within me the great heart of compassion." Imagine asking that. You know, we usually pray for other things. Grant me suffering enough that the great heart of compassion will open in me.

Because part of what we have to offer the world, along with our gratitude and our trust, is not how accomplished and wise and thoughtful we are. We offer the world our humility and our presence and our heart—and our brokenness as well.

There's a story of a Maryknoll nun, and this comes out of one of my favorite books ever—Ram Dass and Paul Gorman's book called *How Can I Help?* A brilliant, wonderful book. This woman, a Maryknoll nun, went to be a school teacher in Peru at a school at 13,500 feet. But after a few years living there, she came down with rheumatoid arthritis that gradually contracted her hands so that they were locked in fists that couldn't even be opened. Eventually she came down the mountain, came back to the U.S., and went to the Mayo Clinic to have surgery—not just on her hands, but on all the other places that the rheumatoid arthritis had damaged her body.

When she went back, she could only go to a lower altitude, but she saw some of her Peruvian friends there. They said, "You're the same kind person you have always been. So let's see what else we can do together."

She said, "My ministry changed. Instead of being the teacher, the one who knew, it became a ministry of walking together. Others with physical disabilities joined together to share our experiences. And it turns out our difficulties and pains and weaknesses proved to be teachers of the great mystery, an introduction into which the spirit can be born.

"I found I'd become much more sensitive to others—more touched, more able to listen, moved more by feelings than by concepts and intellectual ideas. I discovered that the more I opened to the pain of others, the more I found in myself a spirit of service. This was true for the others who were disabled as well. Having been brought low, it was a matter of standing humbly as best we could.

"Many of the Peruvians I ran into with handicaps were deeply ashamed and hid. I would come to see them and they would hide in their own homes. But as I moved about, they would gradually come forth. I think of Juan, a polio victim at three who'd been hidden by his family in their small mud brick house until we discovered him at age eight. His brother Julio took us to his home one day, and there was Juan, his twisted legs underneath him, scooting around the small back dirt patio on a circular piece of rubber.

"His mother was suspicious and didn't want us to stay, for a handicapped child meant she was being punished for something. She was ashamed. We returned, I and these others I worked with, on several

occasions to visit Juan. One time we found him all alone. His family, with the rest of the town, had gone to a religious procession. Of course, he'd never seen one. So we borrowed a bicycle and put Juan on it and joined in the procession itself. It was his first time outside the house, the first time he'd looked at people from a level higher than the ground, his first procession. His parents were immediately annoyed, but their attitude changed gradually."

And when we thought it was right to raise the idea, we asked at the next town meeting if we could raise money to send Juan to Lima for physical rehabilitation. Everybody liked the idea, and Juan went off to the big city. He had a long, hard struggle with much pain and effort, but one day he returned to the village. He was using braces and a cane. It was very hard for him. But as he began to walk down the street to his home, people came out of their own homes. They appeared from all over. They were cheering and clapping, and they followed him all the way home. It was so wonderful. It was Juan's second procession.

Everybody brings their hurts and their trauma and their magnificence and their mystery and their unbearable beauty, all of it wrapped up. And we can bring eyes of compassion and mercy, tenderness, appreciation to the Thanksgiving table—to the wacky relative and the QAnon supporter and the crabby aunt and the misbehaving children that we all were in our time. And as we did in our meditation, we can bow and say, thank you. Thank you to it all. Thank you that we can all be together.

Because when the heart opens, it is said that even the leaves on the trees become like pages in the holy books. Everything we see is colored by the attention of the heart, by mercy, by care.

I saw this cartoon with several panels. Someone was in trouble and when he gets out of it, he says, "Thank you, Jesus." And then in the next panel, there's a picture of Jesus Garcia. He's got a little name tag on—he's obviously working somewhere, got some job—and he says, "De nada." Thank you, Jesus. Jesus says, de nada.

There's a doctor that I admire a great deal. His name is James J. O'Connell. Dr. O'Connell was a physician trained at Harvard Medical School, and being near the top of his class, he went over to Mass General Hospital, one of the great teaching hospitals in Boston, and became one of the chief residents there. He was highly accomplished. But he'd heard from some friends that there was an interesting problem to solve, an interesting place to go and work—to learn how to work with the homeless population in Boston.

So he decided to go for a month to a clinic that he was directed to, to learn about how to be a physician for those who had no homes, who were houseless or homeless. He went in and met this nurse. Her name was Barbara McInnes, who he later said was the greatest saint he'd ever encountered. But there she was, just an older nurse. She welcomed him. "Hello, doctor. I'm so glad you're going to be with us. We're grateful to have you. I have a little bit of instruction and guidance for you."

"Yes," he said. "You've been doing this a long time. Tell me."

She said, "Well, first, lose the white coat. Take off the stethoscope." Which he did. She said, "And for these

first weeks here, what I'd like you to do is to wash the feet of the homeless people as they come in."

Now there's something biblical, if you will, about this story. What does it mean to wash the feet of someone? There's a kind of humility and tenderness in it, but it's a lot more than that. He writes about it, saying that as a physician, all of a sudden he could see so much that was going on for them. He could see the swollen feet and the diabetes and the blood pressure, all these things, because he had time to touch and be with their bodies. But more than that, he said, he could listen. And as he washed their feet and massaged and tended their feet, they would begin to tell him their stories in ways that he would never have heard anywhere else.

And then of course, Barbara said, "Well, we have to go out on rounds." He was used to hospital rounds from one ward to another. But they got in the van and did rounds under the bridges. She would go out and he would go with her, and she would introduce him to her patients, and they would look at their feet and look at their bodies.

He was so moved by it that he made it his own ministry, his own work, which he's been doing now for twenty-five or thirty years. And he created a program where physicians in training at Harvard Medical School and at places like Mass General and other hospitals around Boston—many, many of them are invited to come and do a rotation and learn what it means to attend to people who are on the streets. Beautiful, beautiful work. And a lot of it is just listening.

We want to talk about gratitude or trust or generosity. To listen is an enormous act of generosity.

And I think about—I've told this story of my beloved Trudy, my wife and partner and colleague, dharma teacher—going to work with this very tiny, but as they call it, "small but mighty" anti-genocide group in Africa. While the big NGOs go in and bring their crates of things, have their Land Rovers, have a whole program of how they're going to help people, what the IACT folks did was go and sit down on the dirt in the desert with all the refugees from Darfur in these huge, desolate desert camps. They sat down with the women and asked, "What do you need? What do you want?"

And the women said, "We want preschool for our kids. We want them to begin to realize that they can learn. And we want soccer. We want our children also to realize they can be part of the world."

And so now in many of these camps, there are these beautiful preschools where the kids are learning practices of mindfulness and compassion, things that IACT has been teaching along with education of language and words. And the soccer teams have grown up. A lot of them still playing barefoot, but they've got shoes and balls and all these things donated from around the world. And now there is a Darfur United team that went to—I forget, it might have been Doha or the United Emirates or somewhere in Dubai—for the World Street Cup Championship. They got new shoes and uniforms, and their whole wish was that they would score at least one goal in this world competition, which they did. And the camps all cheered because it made them related and connected to the world.

This is something that we all can do. Even if we're alone, we can share a smile. We can be grateful when we go shopping and encounter somebody. We are in the network of mutuality, the shared garment of destiny, as Martin Luther King said.

Some years ago on a sunny Seattle afternoon in a park, a young Catholic priest stopped to talk to a parishioner and her five-year-old daughter, Carmen. The little girl had a new jump rope, and the young priest began to demonstrate the intricacies of jumping rope to her. After a while, Carmen began to jump—first once, then twice. Mother and priest clapped loudly for her skill, and eventually the little girl was able to jump quite well on her own and wandered off with her newfound skill. Priest and mother chatted for a few moments until Carmen, with the saddest, wisest eyes, returned, dragging her rope. "Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."

We need each other. And maybe we're put in this world to admire it, to love it, to be grateful for it.

In the Buddhist teachings, it's said that there are three levels of generosity or giving of *dāna*. The first is tentative giving, where you have stuff or things and you say, "Well, maybe I'll need it, maybe I won't. It's cluttering up my house. All right, I'll give it away." There's that sort of doubt. We've all been there. You know what that's like—should I keep it? No, I don't have any use for it. I'll give it to someone else. Tentative giving.

Then there's brotherly or sisterly giving, where you see others as your family. You see them through the eyes of family and you say, "I have this. Won't you share? Won't you also be part of what I have? Let us share this together. We're in this together."

And then the third is called royal giving, like the king or queen who has the treasure house. Rumi says, "Walking out of the treasury, I feel generous. Anyone still sober in this weather has missed the point"—the spring weather. In royal giving, there is the delight of taking the best that you have and saying, "Here, you have this, you share this," because the joy is so great in sharing and in giving.

You can think about it. Those who've been really generous around you—how do you feel toward them? And how does it feel when you've been generous in that way? You can also reflect: what does the opposite feel like? The times when our minds are fearful, worried, miserly, stingy, clinging in some way, hoarding—all those kinds of things. Without being judgmental about it, how does it feel?

Gratitude, generosity, trust. When they are present—which they are in you—when you honor them and allow them to flower, they connect. They bring joy again. As Brother David said, it's not joy that makes you grateful. It's gratefulness that makes you joyful.

Your body isn't yours. And it's not just that I'm saying your consciousness and your spirit will leave the body when you die. That will happen.

You'll see. And you'll look back and just say, wow, that was an incarnation. You kind of look at that whole

thing as you float out of your body into the light. You'll see.

But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that you are an organism that is an entire ecosystem with what is now estimated to be a trillion other living beings. The viruses and the bacteria that live not just in your gut, but in every part of your body. Every square inch of your skin has hundreds of thousands and billions of little creatures. The weight of your body—I think it's something like three quarters of your body is not your own cells. It's all these other organisms.

Now you might say, ew, creepy. But guess what? We are life. Breathing, living life. We can't separate ourselves out in that way. That's a fiction. That small separate self, sometimes called the body of fear. Yes, we have to stop at a red light. Yes, we have to remember our social security number. There are things we have to tend to as an individual. But we are in this mutual garment of destiny. This shared mutuality.

And what do we want to do in this life if we're connected with it all? What better thing to do than to love? What better thing to do than to be grateful for it? And you know, when you're with people who have gratitude and generosity, how much delight it brings.

Someone was asked in a classroom, what is it that helps us to see goodness? "I see the goodness on my husband's face when he sees the kids after an out-of-town trip. They all run toward him, Daddy!" "I see the goodness when my youngest son hears the fatigue in my voice and brings me a cup of water. Here, Mommy." "I see it in my wife when she greets the parking attendant or the cashier with such kindness and attention and respect." "I see it when my best friend comes home and hugs his dog with deep affection." "I see it when my husband pulls over to help someone whose car has died and never takes anything for it." "When my partner is tender, willing to stay in relation when things are difficult." "I see it in my five-year-old daughter who says to the sun at sunset, goodbye, I love you."

We have this in us—gratitude, royal generosity. And this season, if anything, is a time to let that shine. I mean, every season is.

I like this poem from Brian Andreas called "Waiting for Signs": "I used to wait for a sign, she said, before I did anything. Then one night I had a dream and an angel in black tights came to me and said, you can start any time now. And then I asked, is this a sign? And the angel started laughing and I woke up smiling. And now I think the whole world is filled with signs. But if there's no laughter, I know they're not for me."

The signs are here, all of it. This is our time on this earth, as Joanna Macy says, for our courage and our love, our wisdom to shine forth. It's our time to serve beyond our fears and small sense of self. It's a time to express this.

There's a song from Idina Menzel. She sings: "At this table, everyone is welcome. At this table, everyone is seen. At this table, everyone matters. No one falls between. At this table, mercy has a seat. At this table, there'll be no judgment. At this table, we're all sons and daughters. There's no better place to be."

Your Thanksgiving table—that's the place.

Your table every night—what do you really want to give thanks for? In the end, what are you grateful for? And if you could do something a little extra generous in this season and this time, what would that be? How might it feel?

May the earth be yours. May the clarity of light be yours. May the fluency of the waters and the ocean be yours. May the protection of the ancestors be yours. And so may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to hold your life.

These blessings from John O'Donohue.

Our meditation, our practice, the Buddhist teachings—they are simply a reminder of who you really are. O nobly born, remember what's possible for your heart and your life. Freedom. Compassion. Tenderness. Humility, because we all have our wounds to share with one another, and our care.

There is a kind of magnificent love that's possible in each person. There really is.

This is who you are.

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