Setting an Intention of the Heart Dharma Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 50:23

So welcome back. And please let yourself sit and listen in a way that's kind of meditative, we might say. That is, there's no exam at the end, nothing you have to take notes for. Remember, if anything, this is just a reminder to something that you already know in yourself. And if there's something that's touched in you, a reminder that matters, then you can keep it. And if things don't seem like they fit, just let them go. Take it as a practice, even as you listen.

So here we are, 2021, in the Northern hemisphere, the winter solstice. And as most everyone knows, that word solstice means the sun is stopping. We get to feel the turning of the seasons when we pay attention—that music of the spheres. Most cultures, as we know, have some kind of ritual for the solstice: songs, prayers for the light to come back, offerings, communal gatherings. And of course, all the holy days that we know—Christmas and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and the Islamic holidays and the indigenous celebrations—so many ways that people celebrate.

Because it reminds us that we live by rhythms that are not the rhythms of the internet or the cars or business. There's another kind of rhythm. The great rhythm, the breathing of the world that breathes with our breath and the heartbeat. And so we step out of the rhythm of our ordinary life and pause. The question is not the future of humanity, it said, but the presence of eternity—to listen in a deeper way.

And as we do, we get to look around a little, both inwardly and outwardly. I've been watching the migration of the geese. Trudy and I—my beloved—we live on a lagoon near the San Francisco Bay. And there's not just the migration, but there's a huge owl. I believe it's a great horned owl that's in the oak tree between our house and the lagoon, just a few yards outside our window. And it roosts in the top. It's giant—like the size of E.T. in the movie. It will turn its head almost completely around. It's just astonishing to see it there. And I'm hoping sometime maybe I'll get to see it or feel it when it leaves and then comes back again. My neighbor saw it bringing back some little creature that it had caught in its talons, silently.

There's a rhythm to the world that's happening around us—of the creatures and what Chief Seattle called the beasts of the world—and a rhythm of our own heartbeat, the movement of our life. When we get quiet and come into the present, we can feel the aliveness of this rhythm.

The poem from Pablo Neruda that most of you have heard, but I haven't read for years—I thought of it and I love it. Sometimes it's nice to revisit these things. It's called "Keeping Quiet."

Now we will count to 12 and we will all keep still. And for once on the face of the earth, let's not speak in any language. Let's stop for a second and not move our arms so much. It would be an exotic moment without

rush, without engines. We would all be together in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea would not harm whales. And the man gathering salt would look at his hurt hands. And those who prepare green wars, victories with no survivors, would put on clean clothes and walk about with their brothers and sisters in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused with total inactivity. Life is what it is about. If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt the sadness of never understanding ourselves, or threatening ourselves with death.

Now I'll count up to 12 and you keep quiet, and I will go.

An invitation to quiet the mind. An invitation to love and tenderness, to presence.

Now, of course, that all sounds good. It's poetic and gorgeous. He won his Nobel Prize for poetry for good reason. He's the voice of the heart in some way. But it ain't so easy. You know, the advertisements for it make it sound good. But actually, it's really hard when we stop.

We stop and try to sit quietly. And it's like there's a layer of ice that needs to thaw before the water can even move inside. Or maybe it's like there's so much speed in our mind—business and planning and doing—and we try to get still, our body gets quiet. And then it's like in the cartoons when Coyote runs off the cliff and he hasn't looked down yet and his little legs are still going, and then he looks down and goes "oops!" We're somehow suspended even as we start to meditate.

Because when we do sit quietly, as we do sit quietly, as we face the stillness, there also arises—we start to feel the grief that we carry for the sorrows of the world and the immense beauty of life. All of it is there for us when we quiet.

And right now there's the next wave of the pandemic, the spread of Omicron really, really rapidly across the globe. I read that today seventy-five percent of all COVID cases in the US are already Omicron. I think in a couple of days it will be ninety percent. We can't see friends and family in some cases, or have to cancel our travel plans, and schools are closing, stores can't stay open, businesses shuttering. It's really affecting all of us in some deep way. And when we get quiet, we carry all that, because it's there in the field of our lives.

We also are aware of the political gridlock, our longing for something better in the body politic that's not happening. We can feel the weight of the calls for social and economic and racial justice—the continuing racism, the continuing conflict and targeting of people, the continuing economic disparity. We all feel this. And climate change.

So when we sit quietly, there's the stillness and the immense beauty, and then there's also the problems, the difficulties that we share. If we try to hold these in our mind and heart with our small self, our limited self, they're overwhelming. They're just too much to bear. But if we hold them as the bodhisattva that we

are—the great heart of compassion born in you, the being committed to being in this world and to alleviating or diminishing suffering—then all of a sudden it becomes possible.

It's like the poet Ryokan, who wrote, "Oh, that my priest's robes were wide enough to gather up all the suffering people in this floating world." You can imagine Ryokan in his priest's robes gathering everyone up into his heart, saying, "Oh, that I could hold them all in my heart." I put my hand on my heart—you could do the same. You can almost feel this, that this is a different way of holding all that we're going through, the immense beauty and the struggles.

And don't think that it's not the journey. "Go ahead," writes one sage, "light your candles, burn your incense, make your prayers, ring your bells, call out to the gods—but watch out, because the gods will come. And they will put you on the anvil and fire up the forge and beat you and beat you until they turn brass into pure gold."

So we're being asked to be greater than ourselves in this time.

I notice it in myself. This year, at certain points I started to think, "Well, should I be pulling back?" Here I'm seventy-six and a half. I've got hardly—I don't have any unpublished thoughts. I've written a lot, I've done these things, and maybe it's time to just go on a long retreat, to step back. And the world is not as exciting as it used to be. Or maybe I should travel to some more exotic place, or take something new on, or find what will make it fresh.

And then I had this revelation as I was getting quiet and reflecting. Those reflections are about me, the small self, Jack. Am I bored? Have I done enough? Should I do more? Have I fulfilled my job? Whatever. But when I get quiet, I remembered my bodhisattva vows. And I thought, "Oh, it's not about me. It's not about whether I retire or not, or what I do for myself." The bodhisattva vows that I've taken, and that many of us have, are so simple: May I be of service. Whatever gifts I have, may I help to alleviate the suffering of beings everywhere.

And then all of a sudden I felt this lifting of the weight of who I'm supposed to be or what I'm supposed to do—just, "Let me be of service. Let me do something that makes a difference."

But how to do this, how to do this bodhisattva thing? It all sounds very noble.

Trudy and I came back not long ago from leading the legacy retreat that we taught for many years together with Ram Dass. This was the first time without him—it was a year off last year from the pandemic. And I sat in Ram Dass's room. They've made the house where he lived, now called Hanuman Maui, into a temple where you can go on retreat, a few people at a time, and people gather and they chant and they meditate.

And it's quite a beautiful place. I sat in Ram Dass's room, and I'm not that much of a woo-woo person, but it was a surprise how powerful it was. I was sitting and all of a sudden my mind and heart opened to this

immensity, this vastness, emptiness—the fertile emptiness from which everything comes, the vast silence behind everything, the universe, consciousness before form.

I don't mean to make it into something out of reach, because you can experience this too. But there was this sense of vast stillness, becoming that awareness itself, that loving awareness Ram Dass talked about. And then as I fell into that vastness, there appeared in the middle of it a heart. You know, when you watch television or YouTube showing open heart surgery and they crack the chest open and there's that amazing pulsing, beating organ of the heart? That's what appeared. There was the vastness and there was this incredibly tender heart.

And I thought about Ram Dass in his life. The great Tibetan sages say, "My view is as vast as the sky. My actions are as tender as barley flour, as minute and careful." Ram Dass—I loved him and he was a sage and he had his own personality and neurosis, which he famously talked about a lot. But he also worked in the AIDS epidemic and sat with hundreds of people who were dying before we had medicine for HIV. He was there for people whose children died. He was there in Nepal and India working with thousands of people, and it turned out to be five million people that the Seva Foundation he helped found restored sight to. That tenderness at the same time.

Though there's suffering in the world, it's not the end of the story. And the inspiration from Ram Dass—there he was in this somewhat broken body after a huge stroke, twenty years in a wheelchair, still unable to move half his body, repeated infections and hospitalizations. People get loyal to their suffering, they focus on it. But he would go once a week on Mondays to swim in the ocean on the other side of the island, and we would join him. They'd roll him down in this wheelchair with giant wheels across the sand, put on a life vest and give him a little glove for the one hand he could use, and float him out into the ocean. And he would be just smiling and paddling away.

Off this beach, there was a buoy in the water. He would paddle out there and there would usually be twenty or thirty hippies with flowers throwing petals in the water, like it was the river Ganges or something. He would get out to the buoy and float there, open his arms and say, "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy." And then he would say, "Oh joy, oh joy, oh joy," until everybody was singing along with him.

When we quiet ourselves, we can see in a new way, as he did, as we can with the heart. And now is the time of darkness in the northern hemisphere. Our farmer poet Wendell Berry says, "To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight and find that the dark too blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings."

So in the pause in this time of the holy days, there's an invitation to the fertile darkness, the holy darkness, the beautiful, wise, tender darkness. And maybe the virus, which is sending us back to our rooms saying, "Okay, you didn't quite learn your lesson yet, maybe you need a little bit longer"—is inviting us to take an even deeper pause and look at our life.

An old man meets a young man who asks, "Do you remember me?" The old man says no. The young man tells him he was his student, and the teacher asks, "What do you do in your life?" The young man answers, "I became a teacher." The older one says, "How good, like me?" And he says, "Yes, in fact I became a teacher because you inspired me to be like you."

The old man, curious, asked what time he decided to become a teacher. And the young man tells him the story. He says, "One day a friend of mine, another student, came in with a beautiful new watch and I decided I really wanted it. I stole it, took it out of his pocket. Shortly after, my friend noticed his watch was missing and immediately complained to our teacher, who was you. Then you addressed the class saying, 'This student's watch was stolen during classes today. Whoever stole it, please return it.' I didn't give it back because I was ashamed and also because I wanted to keep it. You closed the door and told us all to stand up and form a circle. You were going to search our pockets one by one until the watch was found. However, you told us to close our eyes because you would only look for his watch if we all had our eyes shut. We did as instructed."

You went from pocket to pocket. And when you went through my pocket, you found the watch and took it. But you kept moving, searching through everyone's pockets. And when you were done, you said, "Open your eyes. We have the watch." You didn't tell on me. You never mentioned the episode. You never said who stole the watch. That day you saved my dignity forever. It was the most shameful day of my life. But this was also the day I decided not to become a thief, a bad person. You never said anything, nor did you scold me or take me aside to give me a moral lesson. I received your message clearly. Thanks to you, I understood what a real educator needs to do. Do you remember this episode, teacher?

The old professor answered, "Yes, I remember the situation with the stolen watch, which I was looking for in everyone's pocket. But I don't remember you, because I did my best to keep my own eyes closed while I felt for the watch in pockets as I was looking."

And I learned—oh, this is the heart of teaching: to correct, not to humiliate. If you don't know how to do this, if to correct you must humiliate, you don't know how to teach. And if you do know, then teaching becomes an act and an art of love. Not judging the other, but in the darkness, in the unknowing, seeing with eyes of understanding, trying to understand.

The restorative justice movement in prisons and schools is one of the great exemplars of this, where people get to listen to the person they believed wronged them the most, or the one they've harmed, until very often they come to a heart connection.

Life will test you. Events, loss, death, pandemics, shocks. This past few weeks, our dear friends Gabriel and Katie Stauring, who started the extraordinary nonprofit iACT that does anti-genocide work in Darfur and Sudan—people from there, in Chad and Central African Republic, working with people from Syria and so forth—in the most dangerous places, we worried about them. They came home and they were killed in Los Angeles near their house in a car accident when someone ran a red light. That driver too was killed.

They were in their forties. They had three kids. Terribly painful, tragic. And yet they burned bright. When Gabriel first heard about the continuing genocide in Darfur, he said, "I have to do something." Decades ago, he made forty different trips to Africa, gathering people to help refugees. Yes, life will test you as it tested them. And their response was to burn bright.

In this past week, my dear friend Malidoma Somé, West African shaman and medicine man and professor, also died of cancer. And I remember this story he told, that in Africa, when a woman wants to have a child, before she lets herself get pregnant, she'll go sit out under a tree—a beautiful big tree out in the field—and wait quietly until she hears the song of the child that wants to be born. And when she hears the song of the child that wants to come into her body, she goes and teaches it to her lover, and they sing it together when they make love and create this new life. Then after she gets pregnant, she teaches it to the villagers around. So when the baby is born, the midwife and the women gathered around sing the song of this baby to it, saying, "We know your song. We welcome you." And then that song is sung through the rites of passage—the bar mitzvah or whatever that child goes through in that culture—all the way to the wedding, when both people's songs are sung, to the end of life when it's the very last thing that happens, and those gathered around that person on their last day sing their song to them.

I heard this story and I thought, that's a culture I'd love to live in, where we know each other by our song, where we listen in that deep way.

And then Malidoma went on at another time—and I've told this before here—he said, "In the Dagara people, in my people, we believe that each child is born carrying gifts for this earth. And that their main task is to deliver their cargo." I love that metaphor, because cargo is the word used in West Africa for all those ships that ply the rivers of West Africa and have for centuries. Your task in life is to deliver your cargo.

So when I ask, how do we do this bodhisattva thing? We have to listen: What are your gifts? What is your sense of offering to this world? Like Katie and Gabriel, what do you want to respond to?

How do you find yourself moved and motivated?

To do this bodhisattva thing, you also need to invite a sense of trust. The awakened heart is the same as the trusting heart. Enlightenment is the same as the trusting mind, it says in ancient teachings. Trust. If you don't have it, go look at the buds on the trees around you. If you don't have it, go look at the little green things that are pushing themselves up through the cracks in the cement and the concrete. There is a mysterious unfolding happening right now, always. That's what this life is. It renews itself just as surely as the light will come back from this darkest day of the year in the north.

You can trust inwardly—and I know this from fifty years of working with people in inward processes of meditation, retreats, and therapy—that the inner monsters, the fears and rage and grief and guilt and the things that are stuck there, yes, if there's a lot of trauma they may need to be resourced and supported

with safety. But in the end it's not repressing or judging or fighting. It's inviting the monsters into the heart. It's letting yourself open and say, "This too." To allow the rage or the fear or even the sense of dying, to say, "All right, let me open to this change and trust," as I've seen again and again, that when we let ourselves open to that which is difficult, something new will be born. You know this.

The poet Italo Calvino writes, "What is to give light must endure burning." And sometimes we have to go through the darkness. Sometimes we have to go through the fire and endure things. But the heart wants to heal. The body wants to heal. And it turns out even the inner monsters—in the end, even the fears—they want to be loved. It's kind of remarkable to see it in this inner work. Finally, you get this dialogue with the inner fears and monsters and ask, "Well, what do you need?" And they turn into, "Oh, I just want you to put your arm around me. I want that tenderness. I want to be included too."

But it's not just inwardly, it's outwardly. Inwardly and outwardly.

And you probably know the story of Dante's Divine Comedy, the masterwork of the thirteenth century. An amazing poet. He wrote the Divine Comedy inspired by the woman he fell in love with—Beatrice. It was just before 1300, and Dante spotted this young woman standing on the Ponte Vecchio, this bridge that goes across the river in Florence. It's an amazing, beautiful bridge with all these artworks and shops and various things. And the sight of her lit up his heart and ignited and awakened a sense of love and beauty and something eternal. He only got to speak with her a few times before the plague, the pandemic of the time, took her away. But she somehow became his muse, his inspiration.

Six hundred fifty years later, during World War II, the American army was chasing the German army up the Italian peninsula toward the end of the war. And the Germans in retreat were blowing up everything in their wake, including bridges, to try to stop the American progress. But no one wanted to blow up the Ponte Vecchio because Beatrice had stood on it and Dante had written about it. So the leaders of the German army, some of whom had read Dante and knew this great artist, made radio contact with the Americans and said in plain language that they would leave the Ponte Vecchio intact, but only if the Americans would promise not to use it. And the promise held. The bridge was not blown up, and not one American soldier nor one piece of equipment went across it. The bridge was spared in a modern ruthless war because Beatrice had stood upon it and love had touched Dante. And down through the centuries, it still mattered.

So yes, inwardly, the bodhisattva says, "Yes, I can hold all of this. I invite it all into my heart to be met, to be held, to be loved." But outwardly, yes, there's growing hatred and divisiveness. The bodhisattva sees this and says, "There's a goodness underneath all of this. Under all of this, human beings fundamentally have a good heart."

The bodhisattva honors the truth that everything changes. Remember Mary Oliver saying that to live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your breast as if your life depends upon it, and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

And so the very last words of the Buddha were: All things are impermanent. All things are impermanent. This is the truth.

And the Bodhisattva says, "I love it when it comes, and I love it when it goes."

The Bodhisattva also understands the other truths of existence—that there's suffering in life. It's not a mistake. There's birth and death, joy and sorrow, praise and blame, light and dark, gain and loss, fame and disrepute. Who among us hasn't experienced all of these?

But suffering is only the First Noble Truth. Yes, there's suffering, says the Bodhisattva, but that's not the end of the story. There are causes for our human suffering: greed, hate, ignorance, fear. And there's a path to the end of suffering for everyone's heart—compassion, mindfulness, wise understanding.

And this is who we are. We're being called to this, O Bodhisattvas of the time of change. This is not just a time of change; it's a time of transformation. And it asks us to step out of the small sense of self—what's called the body of fear, the sense of separateness. That's just not true. Instead, we're invited to feel our connection with life itself, and the gifts that we've been given, and the reality that we're not alone, that we're in this together.

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember the spirit that was born into your body, the timeless awareness that is who you are. Take time to listen, to value it. Take time to walk among the trees in nature. Walk by the water and the mountains just to be still. See the rhythms of the oak and the maple, the willows. Take time to meditate.

Bodhisattvas, dear ones, don't fear change and don't fear suffering. They're part of the dance of incarnation. This is us. This is who we are. This is what this life, this human embodiment offers—joy and sorrow, praise and blame, gain and loss. Breathe with it. Like the rivers, feelings and thoughts come and go, relationships come and go. You become the loving heart that says, "Yes, I can hold all of this, this greater dance." Dance with it.

And if you need to, heal your body. Forgive your lover or your ex. Tell your story. Write poems. Make art. Find a gratitude partner where you send something every day—a text saying, "This is something I'm grateful for on this very day." Make a meal for someone. Stand up for justice. Feel your gifts. Use what's been given to you so that when you leave, the world is a little bit better because you, the Bodhisattva, were here.

I said that the last words of the Buddha were, "All things are impermanent." But at the very end, he said something else. As he looked into the eyes of all those gathered around him, after forty-five years of walking the dusty roads of India, speaking to everyone about the freedom and great heart of compassion, the nobility of every being that they could remember and find in themselves—he looked at them and said, "Make of yourself a light."

Become that illumination, O Bodhisattvas, and carry it.

Nelson Mandela: "Keep one's head pointed toward the sun and one's feet moving forward."

So simple. Turn your heart, great Bodhisattva, toward the world. Bring your love and your gifts into it.

But before we do it, I want to remind you that in the chat is the link to IACT, which is the name of the little nonprofit that Gabriel and Katie J. Starring began. I've talked about it before. It's really remarkable—as someone called it, a small but mighty anti-genocide group that has now become a model for people around the world who are working with these streams of refugees. They've learned how to listen to them, how to ask what they need, how to bring the very things that illuminate their lives and their hearts. It's really beautiful work. So please, if you can, support them.

Now I'd like to ask you to get quiet for a moment. We will do a ritual—a ritual of setting the intention for the next movement of the spheres, of the earth around our sun. In this solstice time, we begin another journey around our star. It's a good time. You could call it New Year's, the Holy Days, whatever you wish. It's a good time to set the intention of the heart for what matters to you and how you want to live.

So let your eyes close gently.

The Dalai Lama wakes up early in the morning in the dark and chants his bodhisattva vows: *May I be a boat or raft, a bridge to help those cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry and medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary and a lamp in the darkness for all to follow, as long as earth and stars exist.*

That's a very poetic way to say it. But let yourself set an intention or a vow. It's never too late to start over. Today is the perfect day to set the most beautiful intention of your heart. And it could be just as simple as: *I vow to be kind.* Listen. You will know.

Now, whenever you're ready, let your eyes open again. And I'd like to invite you, if you have one, if you brought one, to light a candle—or turn your little battery-operated candle on. Once you've lit it, place it down where you are.

Now take out the piece of paper that you brought with you, if you did, and the pen. If we were all together in the room, we would do blessing chords. We would do a ritual where we turn to one another and read our intentions, because to speak them out loud, to have them witnessed, gives a beautiful power. It's also a tender thing to hear from another.

But for us in this way, we do need a witness. So on your paper, where you will write your vow or your intention, at the top of it I'd like you to write the name of someone who will be your witness. You can say, "In the name of my inspiration"—and it could be your grandmother or grandfather. It could be Nelson Mandela or Greta Thunberg or Quan Yin or Mother Mary. "In the name of Greta Thunberg..." "In the name of Quan Yin, I set this intention..."

Let yourself finish up what you're writing. If there's more, you can add to it later.

And now, when you're ready—Jesse, would you unmute everyone, please? You can all unmute yourself. You now have permission.

Hold your candle up. Let us all read them aloud. I don't know how this is going to work, but I'm very interested—because there's something compelling and beautiful about giving voice to these words from the heart. So go ahead and hold the candle. We are all witnesses, walking together.

[A moment of voices reading aloud]

Well, it was a little cacophonous—like life—but it was still a beautiful thing to do. Beautiful.

So take this paper, put it someplace special. You have the witness, whoever you wrote down. It would be fun to see who you named.

And I'd like to end with a little blessing chant, but first I want to read a poem that I read periodically.

Thirty years ago, a woman named Lynn Parks came to a Monday night class—a poet who lived in Marin who has since died. To explain one line in her poem: she had brittle bone disease, which means that as a child, many times when she fell, she broke her bones. She said she broke her bones fourteen times as a girl.

But here's her poem:

Take the time to meditate, to pray.
It is the sweet oil that eases the hinge into the garden
so the doorway can swing open easily.
You can always go there.
Consider yourself blessed.
The stones that break your bones will build the altar of your love.
Your home is the garden.
Carry its odor hidden in you into the city.
Suddenly your enemies will buy seed packets
and fall to their knees to plant flowers in the dirt by the road.
They'll call you friend and honor your passing among them.
Give everything away except your garden.
Your worry, your fear, your small-mindedness—
your garden can never be taken from you.

And just as the rain falls on all things, nourishing them with its sweet water, beings everywhere welcoming the rain. Just as the full moon we had last night shines its luminous silver light on all beings—so too may the good intentions of your heart and all the actions of the bodhisattva that you are,

the small and tiny acts of kindness, may they gather together like raindrops into rivulets, into streams, like the moonlight that illuminates even the darkest of nights. May they gather together into rivers and return to the ocean of well-being, to nourish and support and bring blessings to you, to all you care about. May they bring well-being and happiness. May your life become a blessing to yourself and to this world.

May it be so.

I am so grateful to be together with you in this way. This soul's retreat has been really special. I thank you for your stillness and your prayers, your meditation and your vows, your kind attention, and the fact that we get to have this shared communion together of teachings and compassion.

Be well. Take care of yourself and those around you.

And I'll see you in the new year.

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