Wise Society | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 56:02

The teachings are not something, as I often say, that you need to take notes or remember. There's no exam, there's no quiz. They're really more of a reflection of meditation. And tonight in particular, because of some topics that we find difficult, I don't want to teach as if I know the answers. My wife would be happily smiling when I say this. But I offer it really as a contemplation and as a reflection.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is wise society. Part of the reason for doing this is that last month, after I finished giving that talk which included the long and quite wonderful story of Sir Gawain and what it is that women want—those of you who attended know it's a story I love to tell—part of my reason for telling it was actually in response to the Supreme Court decisions recently, especially that about access to abortion, but other things as well. The story really links to that in a certain way, but I didn't do it explicitly. And I felt wrong afterward, like I didn't really say what I wanted to say. So let's try it in a different way tonight.

The first thing is to say that it's a mistake to believe that dharma practice, the inner practice of liberation, is an individual matter. One of the deepest realizations that comes as we meditate, as we pay attention, as we live a life of care and loving awareness and mindfulness, is the growing sense of interdependence—that there's absolutely no separation between our body and the body of the earth, between our life and the DNA and body of the biosphere, the food we eat, and the beings that we live with. We are completely interdependent. And so when I think about teaching meditation and dharma, one of the things that's really obvious is that it has to include our embeddedness in the community in which we live.

Mahatma Gandhi put it explicitly. He said, "Those who say that spirituality has nothing to do with politics do not understand what spirituality really means." They come together.

There are many teachings about wise society. There's a beautiful book called *The Buddhist Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony* by Bhikkhu Bodhi, with a couple of hundred pages of passages from the Buddhist texts and teachings on this very topic. In one passage in the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha says there are four types of beings: those who practice for the welfare of themselves, those who practice for the welfare of others, those whose life and practice is neither for the benefit and welfare of themselves nor of others, and finally, those who practice for the welfare and benefit of themselves and others. This last is his invitation for a wise way of practice.

In another text, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, a beautiful text where he talks about wise society, he says: How can people live in harmony? If they meet together and listen to one another respectfully and depart

in harmony, they will prosper and not decline. If they honor the healthy laws and traditions of the past that other human beings have passed down, they will prosper and not decline—if they don't forget those lessons. If they care for the vulnerable in the society, the children, those who are ill, anyone who's vulnerable, they will prosper and not decline. If they care for their natural environment around them, they will prosper and not decline. Wise society.

This is a divided time. We all know this. It's reflected in our divisive politics, which are more about fear and loss of power than love. We all know this. So then how do we go about attending to wise society? It asks for a kind of courage that is in part the courage of tenderness and vulnerability, of mutual respect.

There's a story I've read before, maybe even sometime in this last year, but I'm going to read again because it's illustrative, as was the Sir Gawain story. It concerns a monastery that has fallen on hard times. Once it was a great order with many houses and monks and nuns, but with the rise of secularism and the decline of those who wanted to join the monasteries—we can see it in our modern culture—it gradually declined until there was only the mother house, an abbot, and four others, all seventy years of age.

In the woods surrounding this great monastery, there was a little hut that the wise rabbi who lived in the town used as a place to meditate. The monks, who were tuned into their environment, could sense when the rabbi had come—the rabbi's in the woods. At one point, they looked at themselves and said, "We are a community in decline. We are about to lose our order. I wonder if the rabbi has anything he could say to help us. Some advice."

So the abbot went to greet the rabbi, his old friend. They embraced one another and gazed at one another.

You know, it's tough being an abbot. Ajahn Chah went over—we took him to the Spencer Abbey to see Father Thomas Keating, one of the greatest Catholic Cistercian monasteries. We stood there, and Thomas Keating was this great big tall monk wearing black and white, sort of penguin-style robes. Ajahn Chah was wearing his dusky forest off-orange robes, and he was sort of short and squat. They looked at each other. The first thing Ajahn Chah said to Thomas Keating—we were in the courtyard with a hundred monks who lived there, and the abbot—he looked at him and said, "I'm so sorry."

It's kind of a weird greeting. I was translating, and Thomas Keating said, "You're so sorry? What kind of greeting is that?"

And Ajahn Chah said—

You're the abbot." And then he turned to all the monks gathered there and said, "You have no idea how hard it is to be an abbot. You should really treasure this man." And Keating had this big smile on his face after that.

So the abbots embraced, and they talked about how hard things were in this world for those who are devoted to a spiritual life. And the rabbi said, "I don't really have any advice for you. The only thing I can

tell you is some sense I have that the Messiah that you wait for is somehow among you." What a strange thing to say. But that's what he said in the end.

The old abbot of the monastery went back after seeing the rabbi, and the monks asked what he had said. "Well, it's the strangest thing," the abbot replied. "He said the Messiah is among you." They thought, what could that mean? Could it mean that one of the monks is the Messiah? Perhaps the abbot himself—after all, he's been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man, a man of light. Surely he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod. Elrod gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's side, when you look back at it, Elrod is virtually always right—often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elrod. But surely not Brother Philip. Philip's so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he does have a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

"Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did. Suppose I'm the Messiah. Oh my. I couldn't be that much."

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

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people still came to visit, to picnic on the lawn, to wander some of the paths, to go to the old chapel as they always had. Without even any words, they began to sense an aura of extraordinary respect that now surrounded the five old monks. It began to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place—just like the metta you were just doing. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently—to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them, and their friends brought friends. Then it happened that some of the younger ones who came started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he might join them. And another. And another. Within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order. Thanks to the rabbi's wisdom, it became a vibrant center of spirituality and light for the community and all those around them. And I suppose, as the fairy tales go, it should be "they lived happily ever after"—or something like that.

So what does this say to us? First, it talks about quieting the mind and opening the heart. Listening deeply. Listening with respect to one another, to ourselves, to our own body and heart, to those around us—including those whom we might judge or disagree with initially.

Reflecting on this: How much respect do you give to those you disagree with? And what would they feel from you? Not that you have to share the same ideas, but is there that spirit of respect? Can you see them

all? As Merton says, can you see the secret beauty behind their eyes? Can you see them all somehow with the heart open—even if you disagree?

Can you see like Quan Yin, with the eyes of compassion and the thousand arms and thousand eyes? You've seen those images of Avalokiteshvara, Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion. She's called "She Who Hears the Cries of the World." She listens to everyone's heart.

The Dharma, the teachings, is the medicine for the world. And part of this medicine is the invitation to this capacity that we have—to listen deeply and to listen with respect. The teachings of the Dharma, beginning with the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, say that suffering for us as human beings in this human incarnation exists.

There is suffering individually and globally, and it has its causes—the Second Noble Truth. The causes of suffering are greed, hatred, and ignorance. The more that we live with and promote and embody greed, or hatred with all of its judgment and anger, or ignorance, the more there will be suffering.

And yet the opposite is also true. Instead of greed, the more there's generosity. Instead of hate, the more there's love and care. Instead of ignorance, the more there's wisdom and truth-seeing, truth-telling. Then the greater happiness and wellbeing. It's not very complicated.

It's a little bit horrifying to look around the world, because there are so many avenues promoting greed in our culture, promoting hatred, promoting lack of truth and ignorance. The point isn't simply to fix it. But the point is to see it clearly, because without seeing it, we can't go another way. Things can seem like they've always been that way—but they haven't, and they don't have to be.

I was so moved today when I listened to a bit of the broadcast of the Pope apologizing to all those native people of Canada—and it could be the US as well—who were stolen from their parents and put into residential schools, places often of torment and abuse, for a hundred years. He apologized. He said there's no excuse. But the amazing thing is that this was taken for granted for a long time. And yet when we hear now and see, we know how wrong it was. This is especially apparent to those who are not part of the dominant dimension of the culture—the women and the BIPOC people.

Let me tell a little moment. I had led a series of meetings for Buddhist teachers from around the world for thirty, forty years, bringing teachers together. One year back in the early nineties, we brought lamas and swamis and mambas and many Western teachers together with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. There we were, seated in his palace, and part of our reason to come together was to reaffirm our ethics and talk about some of the difficulties that had been happening with various Buddhist masters—not to speak of clergy in other religions, political figures, coaches, and all those things. The abuse of power. But we wanted to address it directly. We had this meeting to see how we could operate in a way that safeguards students and teachers. It was very moving, actually, and not easy, because there were some people in the room that everybody knew had been perpetrators of suffering.

At one point, one of the Tibetan nuns who'd come, Tenzin Palmo—she lived in a cave for twelve years, an amazing, wonderful woman—talked about how incredibly hard it was for the nuns and for the women in Tibetan Buddhism. How the men had the good food and the warm places in the monastery, while the women were working in the kitchen or outside. How difficult it was.

The Dalai Lama began to weep. He said, "I knew it was hard. I didn't know it was this hard."

Then Sylvia Wetzel, a teacher from Germany, said, "Your Holiness, can I teach you a meditation?" It was great. The Tibetans would never dare to do that, but you know how we are as Westerners—we're weird and willing to stick our necks out. Everyone gasped. And he said, "Of course."

So she said, "I want you to look around." The room was filled with beautiful thangkas and imagery and statues. "Now close your eyes." She guided him, and everyone. "I'd like you to quiet now, and imagine that there's a little reversal. You see the sixteen thangkas around the room of the great masters and teachers, but now you look at them and they're all in female form. Every one of them—Je Tsongkhapa and all these great masters. And you look and you see that there's a woman in every one of these thangkas. Then you turn around and look at the altar, and all the statues are of female Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Then you look to either side, and there are all those companions in the holy life with you, all these senior women, wise women. And then you look at your own body and you go, 'Oh my, I am the Fourteenth Dakini Dalai Lama.' And you've always been born in a woman's body, because they say that even though men can get enlightened, it's much better to be born in a woman's body."

I tell you, the room was in shock, and I just loved it. It was one of the great moments, because there we were, surrounded by the patriarchy which has been a big part of Buddhist culture—culture around the world. And here was Sylvia flipping the table in such a creative and wonderful way.

Afterward, the Dalai Lama cried a little bit, and he said, "I will do my best to help women become empowered, even in Buddhist tradition, even though it's not what our culture has done before." And slowly it's happened. Slowly.

Patriarchy—you may have noticed it.

It's not just there in the religious or spiritual world. We're all worried about climate change, and yet when you look at Project Drawdown and the greatest science about what will help reverse climate change, as you heard me say, the number one thing at the top of the list is not wind or solar power or change in agriculture. The most effective change of all would be the empowerment of girls and women. That would change the world more radically.

So this means we have to listen, like the monks in that story, to one another with a kind of respect for each being—not in the old way, but in a sacred way, in some new fashion. Even those we might disagree with, like Brother Philip and Brother Elrad at the store and so forth.

My beloved Trudy Goodman, my partner and wife and also dharma teacher, founder of InsightLA, recently went through treatment for uterine cancer. She'd been bleeding a bit and got tested, and it turned out it was cancer. She had major surgery, a radical hysterectomy. We were quite worried, but it turned out fortunately to be very early stage. They said this was all the treatment that she needed, so she's gradually getting better, although it takes a while after surgery.

But some of the remarkable things about it—first of all, she wanted a woman surgeon. We found the top surgeon at UCLA, did it in Los Angeles together. And she said it was amazing. "I went into the operating room and it was all women—the doctors, the nurses, everyone there." She said it made her feel like she was in the right place.

She had the surgery, and when she came out, the nurse who came to take care of her in the recovery room—I came up to see her then—and Trudy said, "What's your name?" She said, "Petra." Trudy said, "What kind of name is that?" I was sitting there looking at my phone or something. Petra said, "It's a Thai name." And Trudy said, "Oh, my husband speaks Thai."

I looked up and I said hello in Thai. She said, "How do you speak Thai?" I said, "Oh, I had been a monk in Thailand." And then she looked and she said, "Are you Jack Kornfield?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Oh, my teacher is Ajahn Chah! I grew up in the province where Ajahn Chah was. He's my teacher. I know you're a student. We have the same teacher." And she came and she bowed and she was so excited. And she said, "Oh, Trudy, you are the dharma teacher here."

It was like we were surrounded by these women who were so loving and supportive. And when Trudy had to get up and do her first walk down the long corridor of the recovery room and back, she started to walk very slowly, and Petra said to her, "Trudy, where is your mind now?" And Trudy said, "It's in my feet." Petra said, "Yes, you must keep it in your body."

Then she started giving us all these dharma teachings—death can come at any time, you must live in the present and pay attention, and so forth. It was kind of wild.

But what's happened since then is Trudy has been sharing this whole journey. At first she was keeping it private, but then on Instagram and in all kinds of ways, she began telling her story, showing images. And she's gotten back hundreds and hundreds of responses from women who say people don't talk so much—certainly in her generation, our generation—about their uterus and their ovaries and surgery and the female organs. And Trudy just, as she does, put it all out there.

She said, "In this time, when in the culture the feminine is not being uplifted but in ways is actually being denigrated, it really feels important that we come together and see the beauty of the feminine and that we uplift it together in some way."

And then Petra said, "Listen, you are the one to heal yourself. You must listen to yourself."

I felt during this whole process these different levels of experience. One that was predominant at times was concern and worry. Will she be okay? I love her.

You know, all the thoughts that we have, especially during almost the week that we had to wait for the pathology report to find out how far the cancer had spread and what kind it actually was. And finally, we got this very good report.

Another dimension at the same time was almost as if I could become vast and silent and say, well, this is human incarnation. Old age, sickness, and death are part of the noble truths of what the Buddha spoke about. It's what comes into human incarnation. We may have many of them in fact, and that's what's happening now. And there's this vast perspective, and the Dharma is to hold it all in compassion and to see it clearly, but not to be so caught by it.

So now I want to move on and talk about something related and even more difficult, which is abortion. And I want to talk about it through the lens of sovereignty from the talk last week, for those of you who attended, on what it is that women want. And from the lens of respect, because this topic is so polarized. Whatever your views about it, this is a reflection. It's a time to meditate and consider.

Because it gets so polarized. On one side, in the polarized view, it's always bad. It's a terrible thing. We must do everything to stop it. You know that view, the anti-abortion view. And then on the other side, it can be called a simple procedure. A medical procedure. People should have the right to their own medical procedure on their own bodies.

But of course, it's not just a medical procedure. And it's not just one thing or the other. And to listen with respect requires a kind of vulnerability and tenderness as we struggle with it.

Long ago when I was much younger, I was with a woman who got pregnant, and it was a little bit of a dangerous pregnancy because she got pregnant on a coil in a way that wasn't necessarily healthy. And we also were really not ready to have a child. So we decided together to have an abortion. And it was hard. It wasn't just an easy thing. It took a lot of consideration and care and thoughtfulness and pain in some cases and struggle. So the idea that an abortion is nothing, just a quick procedure, isn't the truth.

My dear friend Yvonne Rand, who died a few years ago, was one of the main Dharma successors of Suzuki Roshi in San Francisco Zen Center. And she used to host these ceremonies that came from Japan for water babies. It was a ritual primarily for women, although men could attend, who had lost babies through miscarriage, or abortion if they chose that, or other reasons—stillbirth. And women flocked to them because they held in their bodies the kind of loss, and some men too, that it represented. And there was no judgment in it. It didn't say this was wrong or this was right. It was just a tenderness holding our human incarnation, saying this is one of the things we have to struggle with. It's not nothing.

And I know I talk really personally. Back in some of the deepest places in my meditation and my inner exploration, I had the sense, the vision, the experience of past lives and being born—in deepest

meditations and breathwork. A few of those births and deaths were as a tiny little embryo which either miscarried or got aborted. And I can remember feeling I didn't have a personality, I didn't have a life, I didn't know anything, but I could feel I was alive. And I wanted to cling to that life as all life does. And then it was gone. Wow. And then I could feel the cycling to come back again to take another birth. You can believe what you do. I'm just reporting my experience.

Does this mean that therefore we should ban abortion? Not in the slightest. Women need the sovereignty over their own bodies and hearts, and it cannot be dictated to another human being. And if my daughter Caroline was to come to me and say that she wanted or felt that it was right or she needed to have an abortion, I would want my daughter to have that choice, as much as every other woman.

Now, the truth is that more women die in pregnancy in the US than any other developed country because we don't care for them so well. The majority of abortions happen to women in their twenties who are already moms and overwhelmed and can't take care of more children, or have some other part of their life where there are reasons that they cannot. And the truth is that society doesn't support mothers and children, and you know that. We are something like thirtieth or fiftieth on the list of developed and developing nations in terms of how much our society supports women and childcare.

It's crazy—10 times or 50 times as much in other countries as here.

So what does this mean? It means it's not a simple thing. It's tender and vulnerable. It touches on the mystery of incarnation. It happens—just as I described feeling that experience of being born again and again several times in that way. It's certainly not the purview of others to tell a woman what she should do. Even though I can respect those who are the most caring on the pro-life side, I can listen and really respect that. My deepest respect is for the sovereignty of women themselves.

This is really a reflection of our practice of mutual respect—of not lording it over another being, but meeting them as they did in that monastery, seeing each other with the eyes of deep respect. The Buddha's teaching on wise society is not about rigidity or taking a side, but about whether you can come together and hear one another in harmony. Meet with respect, depart with respect. Listen with the body and the heart, hold it all in compassion.

One of the things that strikes me in the Buddhist texts is that at the end of his dialogues with many people who came to see the Buddha—people who said, "Give me teachings of liberation or compassion," or "How do I manage my life?" or "What do I do in this difficult human life?"—and all the different problems people brought, the Buddha would respond as he did. And there are many, many stories and accounts of these dialogues. They end with him saying something very powerful. He looks kindly at that person, as he was the compassionate one. And then he says, "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." It's a really powerful phrase. He gave the best teachings he could. He pointed them in a direction and they had an amazing experience. And he said, "Now it is time for you to do as you see fit." He placed it in the good hearts and hands of that individual who was there in front of him.

We live in a current climate of fear. And when we consider wise society on different sides, there's the fear of the loss of the spiritual. We live in a society that's partly characterized by the absence of the sacred, the loss of values, the loss of church. But unfortunately, the response is more about power. Who's losing power? Who has power? Not a response of love or a sense of the sacred. The Buddhist teachings for wise society say one must look not at the results but at the causes and conditions that allow for respect—of the land, of climate, of one another.

Let's talk about another difficult topic since we're in these deep waters here. I hope it's okay for you. Take a breath.

I want to talk about our prison system because it fits with tonight's teaching. The US has the largest prison system on the entire planet. We have less than 20% of the world's population and this enormous multi-million person, multi-hundreds-of-billions-of-dollars system of locking people up. There is a prison industrial pipeline that goes from the poorest communities right into our prisons. You all know this.

I remember when I brought a group of people together with the Dalai Lama—people who'd been in prison and practicing dharma and somehow got out—to try to educate him about the US, because he seemed to think things were really good here in all kinds of ways. And he wanted to know: What is your American suffering? How can the dharma help? So we brought these people together and he was astonished to hear about the prison system. And I remember one of the young men said, "You have to understand, Your Holiness." He stood up—his name was Amos—and he said, "Man, you gotta get it. They want us in prison. In my hood, in my neighborhood, that was where you were headed."

So Jacques Verduin, one of our community at Spirit Rock, starting almost 30 years ago, began what was called the Insight Prison Project.

And he looked around the room and he said, "I can't read my poem yet."

There were about 300 people in the audience—corrections officials and politicians, the local mayor, the families of these men. And he said, "You men, when you stood up and said you would not be violent men, you also gave us an apology." They said it collectively and deliberately: "For all the ways that we have caused suffering to those we hurt, to our families, to our communities, in all these ways, we feel that suffering now and we apologize. We deeply apologize." And you could feel it.

Luis said, "I can't read you my poem, because it's not just you who needs to apologize." And he turned around and looked at the room—the corrections people, the people from the police, the politicians and various other folks. And he said, "You know, it's we who failed you as well. Almost every one of you was born into a community where you as a child was not protected. You weren't protected from racism. You weren't protected from the poverty where you lived. You weren't given an education that really enhanced your life and protected you. There are so many ways we did not care for you or protect you. And standing here, I offer you an apology on our behalf for what happened to you."

It was an amazing moment. Everybody in the room got quiet. It turned the tables. And then he read his poem.

We're in this together, you know—when we listen with respect. Like that story. We can see the causes and conditions. We can see how we treat the vulnerable among us, as the Buddha said—the homeless, the undocumented, those children who were brought here as young children and still can't live full lives, even though they never lived anywhere else. And our political system doesn't care for them. We're in this together.

I led a men's group with Robert Hall at Spirit Rock some years ago. In the evening, we had a circle where men would get in the middle and tell stories of their lives. One man who was in the middle said he had a radio show in Los Angeles—a blues show. He said, "I'm on every Sunday night, and I get lots of fan letters from people who love the blues. But I especially get letters from men who are inside prisons, because this is one of the things they have—the ability to listen. I got a letter one time from a man named Joe Johnson. And he said, 'I so love your show. I listen every week. I'm a great fan of the blues. And I'd like to ask, would you play some of the early classics? Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters, some of the other great blues masters?'"

So the week after he got the letter, he said on air, "This is going out to a man, Joe Johnson, who clearly knows the history of the blues. It's an honor to play these songs for you, Joe." And he played some of the great old classics.

Two or three weeks later, he received a note from Joe Johnson thanking him. It said, "Thank you. Thank you for playing those for me." And then he said, "It's the first time in my life I can remember hearing my name said with respect."

How about that?

Talking about causes and conditions and respect for one another—we're in this together.

One more story, since we're talking about difficult things. We're reflecting, we're meditating. Let's talk about war.

It's so easy to get fixated, because there's a lot of propaganda. That word is flying around. Now, it's true that what Putin is doing in Ukraine is terrible, but there are also terrible wars all around the world that we're not paying attention to—in Sudan and in Myanmar and so many other places. But if we look at causes and conditions, we have to understand something different. If we look through the eyes of the Dharma and respect for one another.

I was at Ajahn Chah's monastery as a monk, in the Malay Peninsula. His monastery, which was a metta monastery—that was the main practice of loving-kindness—was in a rubber forest going up the mountainside. There was a lot of fighting at that time. There were communist insurgents in the mountains

and the Thai military there. It was during the 1960s and early 70s. Sometimes at night there would be firefights around. When it got close, you could actually see the flash of the guns and hear all that.

Ajahn Chah was known as a peacemaker. He would go to each side and give them amulets to try to protect everyone from being hurt.

But one morning, after a big firefight that was close to the monastery, I was sitting in a clearing doing my meditation and there was an older monk there. A helicopter came over the ridge about a mile or mile and a half away, and it started dropping canister bombs. You could see the explosions up at the top of the ridge.

I said to the old monk, "Well, they must have come to bomb those communist insurgents, or whatever you call them, who were fighting down here last night."

The old monk looked at me and said, "Nah."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, those insurgents—they live in caves about ten kilometers north, two valleys over. We know where they live."

"Well, why are they bombing here?"

He looked at me and said, "There aren't that many of them. If they kill them all off, who would give them the helicopters and all this money?"

The Pentagon is so happy that we have Russia as a new enemy again, returned as an enemy. We who are the largest weapons suppliers on the face of the earth, and then worry that we're not safe.

So we look at causes and conditions. If we look with respect, what does it mean to see honestly and listen deeply to the cries of the world, as Kuan Yin does? What is the answer?

It starts in our hearts. Quiet the mind. Open the heart. Listen with respect. See each other with respect. See ourselves with respect.

And to have both a vast perspective—that this is human incarnation. It's not pretty. It's magnificent and beautiful and creative in all these ways. And it's also difficult. There is suffering, but there are causes and conditions, and it can increase or decrease. If we honor one another, the sovereignty of one another, with respect. If we listen in ourselves in a deep way.

The text says: Others will be cruel; we shall be kind—thus we will incline the heart. Others will kill living beings; we shall protect them—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will steal or be greedy; we shall be generous—thus shall we incline the heart. Others will speak falsely; we shall tell the truth, speak truth—thus we will incline the heart. Others will be arrogant; we will have humility—thus we shall incline

the heart. Others will be unmindful; we will listen with mindfulness—thus we will incline the heart. Others will lack wisdom and compassion; we will develop wisdom and compassion—thus we will incline the heart.

You become a Buddha. You steady your heart. You listen. You trust your body. You see how difficult it is to be human, and how magnificent and beautiful. You see that suffering isn't the end of the story.

Otherwise we wouldn't have Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. We wouldn't have Wangari Maathai and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and all these Nobel laureates who rose above the suffering of the world and show us there's another way.

You are one of them.

And when you meditate, meditation is just a kind of preparation for living wisely. Then in the end, you can listen to this one question: What would love have me do today? With all these things we're concerned about, can we listen? Can we approach them, approach one another, with respect? Quiet the mind. Feel the vastness of life. What would love have me do today?

So these are reflections for you on difficult topics. They're not answers. They're not saying how you should be. As the Buddha says, now it's time for you to go and do as you see fit. But they're reminders of something that you really know and that you can trust.

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