The Garden of the Heart

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:46:50

Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Ileana. I'm very happy to see you all and to be back here in the springtime, at least northern hemisphere spring, and pleased to be able to join you.

This Monday Night Sitting group, for those who are new tonight or attending, has been ongoing now for 39 years. Most of it took place on the beautiful land in Woodacre Valley, San Geronimo Valley at Spirit Rock. I taught Monday night for close to 30 years, once a week. Now I teach it once a month and other people come in. But I really love being able to see your faces on the little squares here because many of you I know well over time. I certainly miss seeing people in person, but this is what we have, so we work with what we got.

What we do on Monday night is really pretty simple. We'll start with some meditation, guided a bit and some silence. Following that, there'll be five minutes or so to stretch and relax, and that's followed by some teachings, as it will be tonight, and then some dialogue with folks.

Busy life, busy world. Let's invite the sense of presence and come into our meditation time.

Find a way to sit that is comfortable and gracious for your body. There's enough suffering in life without actually adding to it from your meditation. Find it comfortable and stable. Let yourself settle. Settle in your place this moment where you are on this earth. And if you're comfortable doing so, let your eyes close gently.

Just begin to tune in. Take two long breaths and let them be an invitation for body and heart and mind to come into the present, to open and soften and make space.

As you tune in with mindful, loving attention to this moment, start with awareness of your body. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a little circle if you wish to release your neck and let it find a simple upright. Relax the shoulders and let the arms and hands rest easily. Feel the weight of your body, how gravity pulls you down to the seat, the chair, your feet, your buttocks into the earth, and feel that solidity, how your body is completely supported just where you are.

Relax. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Here you take your seat in this human form, halfway between heaven and earth, with a loving awareness just now. You could say meditation is an act of love, of bringing loving attention to life right here and now.

As you do, let yourself open to the spirit of trust. The way you can sense this most easily is to bring your awareness to the rhythm of your breath. Notice how it breathes itself. You don't have to do anything. It comes in, the chest and belly rise and fall, goes out like the waves of the ocean. You can trust the breath breathing itself. Feel the breath just as it is—deep or shallow, doesn't matter. Let it breathe how it wants, and receive it as an act of trust.

If it's helpful, you can sense yourself breathing in the ocean of air that you exchange, that every breath brings in fresh new oxygen and air to your body and you breathe out carbon dioxide. You inter-breathe with the trees around you, who drink up the CO2 and breathe out oxygen in return.

And the breath breathes itself with the krill in the ocean and the lemurs in the forests of Madagascar, and the teenagers out on their first date—they're all breathing with you. And you can trust this because you're resting in the breath of the earth that breathes you in all things. Relax into it. Trust in the rhythm of the breath. Gracious and easy. You are breathed by the earth. Trust it.

If you like, you can put a half smile on your lips. You become the Buddha seated under your own tree of enlightenment, sensing the rhythm of life. You take your seat in the midst of it all.

And as the breath breathes itself, invite the mind to quiet and the heart to soften. A sense of benevolent presence, a mindful loving presence, to receive whatever is here with kindness.

And as you breathe, as the breath breathes itself, you can also sense with this trust how the body heals itself. You don't have to breathe the breath. And similarly, every twenty-four hours, one hundred billion new red blood cells are born in your body, renewing your blood, just now. And if you scratch yourself or you fall and break a bone, if you sit quietly, the bones begin to heal. The scratch covers over and the body heals itself. Just as the breath breathes itself, this body too tends and heals itself. Rest in this trust. Feel the endless creativity of renewal, breath by breath, in the whole of your body. Loving awareness and trust, allowing the rhythms of life to renew again with each breath and each moment.

And just as the breath breathes itself so naturally, and the body renews itself and heals itself, so too the heart heals itself. There are times of loss and grief, of pain—but they're not the end of the story. There are all the emotions of longing and love and fear and joy that the heart opens to, and even in the great pains of life, in its own season, the heart finds its way to mend and hold them. Not pushing them away or denying, but as a field of loving awareness, allowing the cycles of loss and gain and pleasure and pain, all the movements of the heart, like the breath, to come, to be known, and in their time to come to a resolution in love. To be healed.

Stay simple and present with the breathing of life. Rest in mindful, loving awareness just now.

And as you feel the breath inter-breathing with all things, the recreation of the breath, one breath at a time, renewing—and the body which renews itself, which heals, which renews—and the heart which heals itself—you can feel the trust. Your attention is an act of love, noticing this creative recreation.

And let your awareness open further to the earth around you. If you're in the Northern hemisphere and it's springtime, there's this amazing recreation of green and flower and bloom every year, wherever you are on the earth. I remember going where there'd been a forest fire, and it rained, and two years later that earth was so thick with green and bushes and young trees insisting on rebirth.

And you breathe gently and feel how the earth renews herself just as you breathe. Trust it. And you sit in this vast stream of recreation—body and heart, mind and earth around you. You sit as a Buddha, witnessing the earth recreating itself in all things. You rest in mindful loving awareness and a timeless trust. You are the loving witness of all things renewing themselves again and again. Change and renewal. You are the loving witness. You are the awakened mindfulness and love itself, witnessing life. Steady and gracious amidst it all.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to open gently. Come back to the visual realm. And let yourself stay with a sense of loving awareness and presence.

And we'll take a five-minute break. If you can remain silent, that would be good. And then we'll come back for teachings.

Hi again, dear friends.

So now we have this part of the Monday night sitting group, which is the teachings. My invitation to you is to take this as a time to relax and listen in a meditative way. You don't have to take notes, you don't have to remember anything—no quiz. Just listen and notice if there are things that touch your heart, that ring true. Let them be a reminder. And things that don't seem helpful, you can simply let them go. This is a kind of inner meditation: to notice, from the outer words and stories and forms, what happens in here. A kind of invitation.

Tonight I'd like to give a talk that's a teaching I've given in previous years—with some stories you may have heard before, as they're among my favorites, and some new ones. It seems particularly fitting since this is the first week of spring in the Northern hemisphere, and we had the eclipse of the moon last night with the solar eclipse coming.

I remember some years ago going up on top of Mount Tamalpais when there was a transit of Venus to be viewed through a telescope across the face of the sun. There were a number of telescopes set up, and I remember looking into the eyepiece. There was that amazing, roiling fire disc of our star, the sun. In a big telescope it's extraordinary to watch because it's alive—like an ocean of color and fire. And then there was this little black dot, like a tiny marble, Venus making its way over the course of two hours across the face of the sun.

It was like seeing the music of the spheres, because I could feel: oh, that's the size of our planet too. Our

little planet—ours is the little blue one, the next one out from Venus—making its circuit around our star. This is us.

We have the music of the spheres and the season of renewal of spring, which is also celebrated in Easter and other renewal holidays after long winters or rains. You walk out sometimes and spring pops. The plum blossoms are there, the forsythia are blooming, the quince. I actually planted quince and forsythia at Spirit Rock knowing that we had the two-month winter retreat in February and March. I wanted people to see the flowers start to come out as their heart and mind opened in that long retreat.

Now there's an old debate in Buddhist teachings about awakening being gradual or sudden. Is it sudden, like spring comes—there you are, you can sort of see the buds on the trees, and then a warm day and it all pops out and the flowers bloom? Or is it a gradual process?

From the sudden awakening perspective, the question is: where are we going? We're not going from here to there. We're going from there to here. From all the ways we may somehow be thinking we're somewhere else, to remember that we're always here in the present.

Meditation, says Alan Watts, is kind of like making music or dancing. The point of making music is not to get to the end of the piece. If that were true, the fastest musicians would be the best: "I got through that piece, give me another one!" Or the point of dancing isn't to have your partner and then dance them down to the grocery store or to some errand. The point of making music and the point of dancing is to be in rhythm just where you are.

And Alan Watts goes on: so the point of meditation isn't some goal that we're going to get to, but the coming into harmony here and now, always. This is T.S. Eliot's phrase—the still point, a condition of complete simplicity, here and now. Asking a surrender of everything. You could call it the reality of the present. A condition of complete simplicity.

And so here we are. Be here now.

Ajahn Chah tried to describe it in the metaphor of still flowing water. Still flowing water.

When we get quiet and take a walk outside with the mind a little quiet and the heart and body open, we become something like the phrase from Mary Oliver. She says, "I was a bride married to amazement," because we sense the mystery of life. We don't know, we can't explain—but we can engage it with our awareness, with our heart. A timeless awareness. We become that space of witnessing, of loving awareness itself, timeless awareness that notices, as we did in the meditation, how everything renews itself.

And the planet circles the sun, and we become the space that holds it all. This is the spacious awareness of awakening, of the Buddha.

And then the mystery is what it is, but somehow in the space of our awareness, joy and sorrow and birth

and death and praise and blame and gain and loss—all the opposites that make up human life—are felt as a kind of rhythm or harmony, like the Tao.

And we all know this. We've had our moments. Maybe walking high in the mountains, or sitting with someone as they're giving birth, or giving birth yourself as a woman, or sitting with someone as they die in that mysterious moment when consciousness leaves the body, silent like a falling star. We know the sense of mystery and rhythm—lying on the grass in the summer and looking at the night sky, or listening to a transporting piece of music, or taking psychedelics, or going on retreat. We've all touched it. We've all had the sense of the mystery and the cosmic dance.

And as one Zen master, Rinzai, speaks of it in perfection, he says, "When I understood, I could go into the three deepest hells as if playing in the fairground and cavort with the most ferocious wild animals, because I saw it all as part of this great dance—all of it."

And even sometimes, in a blessed way, when I've gone in to do prison work or to refugee camps where people are suffering, sometimes immensely, there will be certain people who say, "I may be behind bars, but I'm free." Or they're in a refugee camp and they beam at you with such love and presence. And you can feel from them that the circumstances don't touch the true heart that they are, that true free loving awareness. They become this.

So take a moment to reflect yourself. What were the times when you've experienced this timeless dance of mystery? The perfection of it all, with its ocean of tears and its unbearable beauty. You remember, because you know this. And you don't want to wait till you float out of your body when you die and look back and say, "Wow, that was an amazing incarnation, wasn't it?" You actually want to have it now. To be married to amazement.

And so this is the beautiful revelation of sudden awakening—to see the world, the timeless vision of this world recreating itself, and to be at the still point of the turning world.

And yet there's another side, because we are creatures of paradox. Zen master Suzuki Roshi put it so simply. He said, "You're perfect just the way you are, and there's still room for improvement."

One of the great Korean Zen masters, Sunil, spoke of it in a different way. He said the Zen path for him was one of sudden realization and then gradual practice. Instead of practice to get to realization, it was the mystery, the realization, and then the fulfillment of it. You're perfect just the way you are. Take that in, because it's true. And then, with a smile and playfully, he said, "And there's still room for improvement."

And we can see this. We can see the ways that we get lost in what's called the body of fear—the small, separate sense of self, our confusion and ignorance and grasping, the kind of pains that we go through that stick, the trauma that we have. The way we get lost. And we live in a culture of the absence of the sacred, that takes us away from the sense of mystery.

So how do we shift this? How do we work with this—to shift from the body of fear, this illusion of separateness, to live with that deep realization?

Early one morning, while out on his alms round, the Blessed One, the Buddha, approached an area being plowed in springtime, where a wealthy Brahmin was distributing food to his workers. When the Brahmin saw the Buddha with an alms bowl, he said, "Oh monk, I plow and sow, and having plowed and sown, I eat. Do you likewise plow and sow, and having done so, you eat?"

He was confronting the Buddha, saying, "Listen, I'm a landowner, I have people work for me and I work, and then I get food. How about you with your alms bowl?"

And the Buddha looked back and said, "I also plow and sow, and having done so, I eat."

And the Brahmin said, "You claim this, but I see no plow. What is it you do?"

The Buddha replied, "Faith is the seed and composure the rain. Clarity is my plow and yoke. Compassion is my guide pole and mind is the harness. Mindfulness is the plow blade and my goad—caring in action and speech. I use truth to weed and cultivate release. Wise effort is my oxen, drawing the plow steadily toward freedom without regret."

This is how I plow, and it bears the fruit of freedom—the deathless itself.

At this point, the Brahmin, the wealthy landowner, says, "I see that you are a plowman. Let me place some food into your bowl." And he tried to put food into the Buddha's bowl. When he poured the rice gruel into the bowl, it hissed and a huge cloud of steam rose up—or so the story tells.

I love these old mythological weavings in the story, because the metaphor here is that if you've ever touched a plow blade after it digs a furrow across a field, it gets really, really hot. It can almost get red hot from plowing. And so the Buddha's alms bowl becomes the plow blade, and putting anything wet in it causes it to hiss because he's been plowing.

I love this text, this encounter that's described. As the Buddha talks about planting seeds with faith and trust and mindfulness, and as we practice—as we establish over the months and years of our own meditation our mindful loving awareness, as we establish loving kindness and forgiveness and compassion as our practices—they too become part of what bears the fruit of inner freedom, inner wellbeing. And you can feel it in yourself. It grows, it opens, it flourishes.

So good. Now we're plowing, we've put in beautiful seeds—faith and trust, energy, the oxen of wise effort, mindfulness and so forth. But then what? Obstacles arise.

If you have a garden, there are weeds, insects, drought, storms, gophers—all kinds of things you have to work with once you've planted your seeds. All of you who are gardeners know this very well. And similarly, whatever else you choose to do as an activity, whatever you devote yourself to—be that field, if

you will, of attention—when you do it, obstacles will arise.

If you start a business, at some point there will be obstacles: a key employee quits, the market changes, you don't have enough capital, there are supply chain problems, there's competition. If you're parenting—oh my gosh, it's an obstacle course. First, they want to put everything in their mouth. I remember when my daughter—we were driving down the coast, I don't know how many months old she was, like five months or something—she grabbed a penny and put it in her mouth. I looked and it was gone; she'd swallowed it. We called her pediatrician: "What do we do? Is this an emergency?" And the pediatrician said, "It's okay. It'll be all right." I was still quite worried. Two days later, I was changing her diaper, and in the diaper was the shiniest penny I'd ever seen.

But there you are. You've got a kid and they want to put things in their mouth, or they're in preschool and they hit each other with blocks and you say, "No, no, use your words," or "Don't run into the street." They learn to ride a bicycle and they fall. They go through puberty—remember that one? And then they learn to drive. And then there's sexuality and their independence. Lots of obstacles. And you have to keep steadily continuing your care.

The same holds true for social change. The money dries up, the activists burn out, the politics change. Or in love relationships—at first, it seems so compatible. You fall in love. But we all know that story. As you get close, the shadows arise, the difficulties come as well. And that's what love is about: how to tend the obstacles.

And you sure enough know it in meditation. That's why there are all these texts about the hindrances—the arising of fear and anxiety and doubt and confusion and anger and all of those kinds of things.

The poet Hafez says: "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it season you. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few divine ingredients can."

And so instead of getting rid of these things as you meditate—because they will all come up—you watch your mind. Remember that roadside billboard someone saw driving across Arizona: "Your own tedious thoughts, next 200 miles." I think it was actually in a cartoon. But you sit with all these things, and as you practice, whether you're a parent or a business person or a meditator, the obstacles come and the hindrances arise, and you become the loving witness that tends them with care.

A poem for you:

My son comes into the kitchen and asks if he can have an avocado. Avocado, he says, loving the weight of each green syllable on his five-year-old tongue. Avocados represent an immense step for him, an evolutionary leap far beyond the narrow confines of cornflakes wherein he has dwelt for so long. The breast, the cornflakes, the avocado—such has been his journey thus far. You'll have to wait until they're ripe, I tell him. Do you want some cereal instead? No thanks, he says, and wanders back into the world of being five, while I, doing dishes at this point, start thinking about ripening and how glad I am that it takes time. And his own

ripening will be years in the making. Years, I say aloud, enjoying that long luxurious syllable, like a cat stretching out my tongue. As Michael comes in again—it's been five minutes—and asks, are they ripe yet?

This is from George Mugier, "Are They Ripe Yet?" And that's what we see too when we sit: the impatience, and where are we going, and are we there yet?

I love the story of these two men who went up to the great botanical garden in Montreal. They drove up because it has the largest collection of bonsai in North America. They drove a long way to get there, this man and his husband. And they got to the gates and they were locked—it was closed that week. One of them chided the other and said, "Didn't you look into it?" You know how it is as a couple. "Weren't you supposed to figure that out? We came all this way and it's closed."

But the other, who was in a more contemplative mood in his life, said, "The gates are closed. Let's just take a breath." And he started to walk, like doing walking meditation, in front of these huge gates and the great facade and the sign of the Montreal Botanical Garden. Then he began to walk further, slowly, just contemplating: What's the next move? What will we do? His partner followed him and they walked further around the side of the great garden. After about five minutes of walking, the fence disappeared and you could just go in. It turned out there was a big gate and a big front, but it wasn't walled in all the way around.

It was that patience of allowing space to open—saying, instead of trying to break down the gates or blame, "Hey, let's take a breath. Let's walk a little. Let's see what there is. Let's see what wants to unfold."

And so we practice. We make space. The text says: As the farmer channels water to his crops and as the carpenter turns his wood, so the wise one pays attention graciously to what's in front of them, directing their heart and mind.

Let yourself reflect for a moment on the quality of loving presence and what it's like when you're not in a hurry, when you're trusting. Presence becomes an act of love and graciousness, space opening. Remember when this happens for you. You can know. Delicious, isn't it, when you remember it?

That's what meditation does. It makes space. We step out of the thrall of our plans and our thoughts and our reactions and how it should be and what's happened and what should happen. Out of the fears and confusions and sadness and excitement and all of those things. And we become the space of awareness, of loving awareness that says, "Yes, it's an act of love."

And then what? Well, the texts say you want to plant good seeds.

He says, consciousness is like a field filled with all kinds of seeds. And for human beings, these are seeds of fear and anger and greed and hatred and confusion—and seeds of love and caring, seeds of wisdom and understanding, seeds of mindfulness and forgiveness. Which seeds will grow?

He goes on: When you tend your garden and you water the seeds of respect and presence, of love and

kindness, of mindfulness itself, those are the seeds that will grow. If you water the seeds of anger, anger grows. If you water the seeds of kindness, you practice it, you tend it, you remember it—it grows. It means that you stay connected to your deep intention.

Thoreau put it this way. He said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there and I'm prepared to expect miracles."

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you are. Sons and daughters of the Buddha, nobly born, you have within you good seeds. And the Buddha goes on: it's not by caste or race or creed or background, by religion or wherever or however you're born, whatever body or incarnation or ability. He says one is noble by heart. If there's nobility in the heart, that is what brings awakening. "Oh nobly born," these texts begin, reminding you of your own good seeds.

I love this story. I have told it over the years. There was a teacher in Ohio, a high school math teacher, who had a student she liked quite a lot and became close to. It turned out that in her class, in the autumn semester near Thanksgiving, the class was getting really restless. She was watching the teenagers and how critical they can be of themselves and one another. So before the holiday, in the last class, she wrote the name of every one of the thirty-one students in the class on the blackboard. She asked them to copy it down and then to write on that piece of paper one thing that they observed that they liked or appreciated or admired about that student in their class. Before the holiday, she collected them.

Then in the springtime, again before spring break—the class was rowdy and nobody was learning math anyway—she called the class to attention and handed back a gift. She had taken those thirty-one pages and cut them apart, put the name of a student at the top of each page, and pasted in the thirty-one good things that their fellow students had said of them. People got them and read them and loved them.

Well, it turns out that Billy, we'll call him, was in the class—a bit of a cutup, but also really sweet, and she had a great connection with him. He went into the military, and his mother called the teacher two or three years later and said, "I have to tell you, I'm so sorry. I know he was one of your favorite students. He was killed in action in the Middle East. We're having a memorial service this weekend and I thought you might want to come."

So the teacher went, and there at the graveside, people stood and spoke about Billy and their affection for him. Then his mother turned to the teacher and said, "You know, they sent back to me everything Billy was carrying on the field of battle. And one of the things in his pocket was this." She opened that page—that had obviously been opened and closed many times—with the thirty-one things that people had written that they liked about Billy or appreciated. Then the girl next to her said, "Oh, I always carry mine," and took it out of her purse. And a boy across the way said, "Yeah, I carried it with me when I got married, in my wedding."

It's such an extraordinary thing, not only to sense the good seeds that we carry, but to acknowledge them and to water them. Because it's who you really are. You sense them and you tend them.

And then the Buddhist texts go on: "As a bee gathers nectar and perfume from the flowers without marring their beauty, let the wise one wander, bringing blessings to many and harm to none."

So we feed these seeds of goodness with our attention and our care and our forgiveness and our kindness—all those different dharma qualities. We nourish them, remember them, sense them, inhabit them.

But what's important also is not to be idealistic about it. You're not trying to make some beautiful house, you know, those magazines—House and Garden—"I'm going to make this photogenic life and post it on Instagram and become a Buddhist influencer." It's not about perfection.

Remember the story of the young physician who was driving her four or five-year-old daughter to preschool, kid in the child seat in the back. Her little daughter opened her doctor's bag and pulled out the stethoscope, playing with it, and put it in her ears like she'd seen her mother do. The mother in the front seat glanced back and thought, "Oh, maybe my daughter will go to medical school, she'll be a doctor like me"—all the thoughts that parents might have. Then the little girl took the other end of the stethoscope, put it up to her mouth, and said, "Welcome to McDonald's."

May I take your order, please?

We have so many ideas about how it's supposed to be. But as the bee gathers the nectar and perfume from flowers without marring their beauty, so let the wise ones attend to whatever arises and bring kindness and blessing—not their ideas about it, but the actual experience of the way things are.

And then you just stay steady. Again, the poetry of the Buddha: just as the rainwater jar is filled drop by drop, so may those who practice loving-kindness and presence find their hearts filled with drops of awareness and love.

And of course, the conditions all keep changing. Sometimes it's hot or cold, the sun's out, there are big storms. You know about the changing conditions. You know about the difficulties. And when we live in the heart, when we live in the space of loving awareness, of the inner freedom that is your birthright—when things are difficult, you ask, what's the lesson here? What is this inviting me to understand or grow in? Growing in courage, growing in forgiveness, fearlessness, growing in perseverance or compassion, growing in understanding.

My teacher Ajahn Chah loved difficult conditions. He loved it when we had a hard time. We were in an ascetic forest monastery where things were really tough, and he relished that it was tough. At times he would ask us, "When did you learn the most? When things were easy? Or when did you really learn in your own heart the deep dharma?"

This from Karlfried Dürckheim, a Zen teacher: "The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not as a consequence turn only to those friends who offer refuge and comfort so their old self can survive. Rather, they will seek out those who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

So you're doing your garden, you're planting, you're practicing, you're watering the seeds—and baby, it'll get tough. People die. People get sick. Your body will get sick. You'll lose things. Finances go up and down. All the things of life will happen. This is your practice. And not in a glib way. This is the place to find that which is timeless and indestructible.

Reflect for a minute. Take a pause. And remember when you've gone through serious difficulties—we all have—and what you were called to learn in your heart.

What you begin to notice when you reflect in this way is the magic of a shift of identity. When you get through those difficulties, you become what Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows." You become the field of mindful, loving awareness itself. You become like the Bodhisattva—the being who goes through difficulties not only to go through them and to awaken with all those seeds, but in some deep way, from that, to be able to offer that spirit of freedom to whatever else you encounter and touch.

This happens—you know this. You know when you've gone through something difficult that when you finished, you became something bigger and wiser and freer. And for the Bodhisattva, it's like they say, "Yes, is there something difficult to do around here? Someone in difficulty?" And you turn toward it and say, "Aha, perfect place to practice."

I love the story of Kathy Sneed. She worked in the sheriff's office in the city and county of San Francisco. Then she got sick and was looking to somehow change her work due to serious illness, but still needed to work. She got permission—there had been an old garden as part of a very large jail complex—to help the inmates there plant a garden. And that was the beginning of Kathy Sneed's prison garden project. People were really dubious about it, saying, "Hey, these inmates, these prisoners can be mean and lazy. Why would they ever want a garden?"

But of course, Kathy, who had witnessed the racist poverty pipeline into prisons over the years—where people came in from communities with so few resources—understood that this is often where you end up if you were born into that kind of poverty. She said, "Give me a chance."

And she got some men to go out and dig some beds. She got volunteer gardening centers to deliver good soil and amendments. She got people to offer up seeds for her. And she took some of the most hardcore residents and gave them hoes and shovels, gardening implements—and they loved it.

It gave them a sense of purpose, and the garden started to grow. Over the years, the garden produced

literally thousands of pounds of organic food, which they gave to soup kitchens and those who were homeless around the community.

And she said it was amazing. You'd see this guy, all tough, and you'd go into the garden and someone would be walking by, and he'd say, "Don't step on those flowers, man. I just planted those. Be careful of those tomatoes." As if they were tending their own children. They got so connected to this, and to the fact that they could renew themselves through the garden. Because it wasn't just about the garden. It was really about giving a chance for that renewal that we all long for.

Yes, it reduced recidivism when they got out—but not as much as expected. And then they discovered something wild: some of these men were actually breaking parole or doing things that would get them back in prison because they missed their garden. So she started the Inside and Outside garden project, so you didn't have to come back in to tend your garden.

But this is what we're doing. We're taking this fertile earth—yes, with its gophers and its insects and all those things—and we're making something beautiful, outside and inside. And it's completely trustworthy. As Tennessee Williams said, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's a power in planting seeds and tending them. This is the garden of the heart.

Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. You are creativity itself, born into this incarnation. You are creative consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh calls it hide and seek. You pretend that you're a human being, but who you are is life itself.

And of course, you have dozens of identities. You're a son or a daughter, a parent or a sibling at times. You can have multiple identities. In one room, you'll be the child of someone and the parent of another person. You're a student at times, you're a teacher. You have your ethnic identity, your racial identity, your gender identity, your political identity—"I'm a liberal" or "a conservative" or whatever.

But that's not who you are. That's the hide and seek part. That's part of the incarnation you got to work with and play with, but it's not who you are. Who you are is consciousness itself. You are loving awareness, vast and timeless. You are the creativity of life displaying itself, playing in this human form. Hide and seek, says Thich Nhat Hanh. Remember who you really are. There's a freedom no one can take from you.

Take a breath. Reflect. Amidst it all, there is a freedom no one can take from you. Feel the space of loving awareness, vast enough to hold it all, timeless. You get to be the loving witness—like the Buddha touching the earth, seeing all of the renewal season by season, all the joys and sorrows seen with the eyes of compassion and wisdom.

And what do you do then? You see it, you sense it, and you become like a bodhisattva. Not because you're supposed to, but because it's all you. You're not separate from it. Every breath, every cell in your body knows you're connected. And so you reach out—

touch and mend what you can, because it's part of you. It's all you. This is us.

I spoke to the mother of a very beloved and kind-hearted man, Gabriel Klein, who died in an accident recently. At his memorial, his brother-in-law described going to Costco with this warm-hearted and very special young man on a stormy day. They did all their shopping, getting ready for something, and then went back out into the pouring rain in the parking lot, got to their car, and loaded all the things. The brother-in-law who had the cart sort of pushed it aside so they could get the car out. But instead, Gabriel got out in the pouring rain and walked the cart all the way back to the store.

After they drove away, his brother-in-law asked, "Why did you do that?"

And Gabriel said, "There's a person there whose job it is to take the cart from point A to point B, from the lot back. There's no reason to make their job harder." He said, "It seems like there are two kinds of opportunities for people in the world. There are the kind of people who leave the cart, and those who bring it back."

So tiny and so simple. And yet that bodhisattva vow—in Diane Ackerman's words, a kind of modern bodhisattva vow: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

Whether it's the shopping carts in the lot in the rain, whether it's someone you encounter on the street, whether you get in a fender bender accident, or whether you're going to your business or school or wherever—you get to be the loving one. You get to be the one with the free heart. You get to be the bodhisattva or the Buddha amidst it all.

And it's not like it's going to turn out and everything will be hunky-dory and great. It says in the Bhagavad Gita that the secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of the action—to plant beautiful seeds, to water them, to care for them, and trust that in their own time, they will bear fruit.

It's never too late to tend and water the good seeds in the heart and mind. And water and tend the good seeds in your actions and deeds in the world around. It's never too late.

The practice I want to suggest to you as we wind down is again a reflection. For those who want more of it, you can look in my book *The Lamp in the Darkness*. There's a whole extensive guided meditation in which you allow an awakened being or an awakened figure to take over your own life and see what they do. Because the wisest part of you already knows. You already know.

So here's your practice for tomorrow, this evening, this week, this year: Pretend you're enlightened. Pretend you're spacious and gracious like a Buddha—wise, allowing for all things, at peace in the midst of them. Seeing the world with the great heart of compassion. Reaching out and mending or touching the things that you can, the things that come to you, with compassion and kindness.

Imagine it, feel it. Suppose you were to decide, "All right, I will act and live and pretend as if I am a Buddha, as if I am awakened." What would that be like at work? At home? Toward yourself? You can sense or picture it because you do know.

O nobly born, remember who you are.

So thank you for listening. Happy spring to you in the Northern Hemisphere, and a beautiful autumn for those in the Southern Hemisphere, and a beautiful ongoing flowering of life for those in the middle by the equator. All good, as they say. All good.

And I wanted to hear the good stuff, obviously. But I wanted to tell you that you have been helping me a great deal with my father right now. He is 97 years old with dementia and doesn't remember that he served as a leukemia doctor for over 60 years. And this man who has been the hardest karmic relationship this go-round is now like a little child. And all of my hospice practice is coming to bear, just being loving with him. I have been able to forgive him and just feel so grateful for this dharma path.

Thank you. I can see it. I mean, it's hard. Sometimes it doesn't happen till near the end. The very end.

So thank you.

There's also something strange. It's not that likely, but sometimes—I'm going to use an image just because it's fun, about dementia, to kind of expand the conversation. Back in the 1970s, there was a series of books by this sort of channeled entity named Seth—

Seth Speaks. I remember.

You're old enough, you might remember those. And there was an image in that book. Seth, or whoever he was talking to, had gone to an old age home, a place where people were placed when they needed care. And he said, "I want you to look at this. What do you see?" And the fellow said, "I see a porch with eight rocking chairs and eight people who are nodding or drooling on themselves, really out of it." And Seth said, "Do you want to know what I see?" "Of course." "Well, I see that line of people, but I actually see they're all up there above that place having a party. Their bodies are down here and they're actually talking and having a great time."

I'm not saying it's completely true. Who knows? Because it's so mysterious. But there's some way—not only have you worked through with your forgiveness, and that's so important, and I so respect it—but also there's a kind of mystery in dementia. Like, who are we? Sometimes there's something there that we can't even tell, but what's left is love. And that's what you're doing.

And he's talking with my deceased mom, you know.

Who knows where she is. Maybe. We don't know. Maybe they're talking. You think he's there. He's out with your deceased mom. It's really mysterious, but your heart is what you get to tend, and it's beautiful.

Thank you, Ginger. So glad to see you.

Thank you for this evening. This is actually my first time in this space, and I feel very welcomed and very happy to be here. I was really moved by what you said about the culture—that we live in a culture of the absence of the sacred. I have worked for every tech company, most of them, and I swim in those waters. This notion of the rational, of meritocracy, of this resistance to seeing the inequity in the world and the absence of the sacred.

I just wanted to share that "just pretend you're enlightened" is such a beautiful, funny invitation—just to not fight, to know your true nature, to know my true nature. I'm an MMTCP graduate and I teach every Wednesday, which I love. Thank you for that, because I think those of us who are in workplaces feel a sense of duality. I'm very grateful, very blessed to be here.

Thank you, Jess. I want to ask you, because whether it's the tech world or other places—I'll get a call from somebody who's in the military, and it's not that all the military is that way, but parts of it are very difficult. Even if you close your eyes and remember, what does it feel like when you're living in your own loving awareness in the midst of that tech world? On a good day, when you feel you're staying true to yourself and your values and the sense of the sacred amidst it all—what is that like? What have you learned?

I think that I don't have to fight everyone's fight. I feel a sense of release. There's a physicality almost, a leaning back—it's not a forward motion of having to prove or change or educate someone, but more of meeting this person where they are.

Yes.

And hopefully they can meet me where I am. There's that sense of connection. That's when it's felt good. And I also realize that people bring with them to the workplace—it's not just a workplace, it's our lives. People say work-life balance, but it's just your life and it just shows up. So I try to remember that people are on their path, on their journey, and are coming to this Zoom screen or wherever we are with their own pain and suffering and misconceptions.

That's true. They come and who knows what happened to them that morning. They could have a sick kid, they could have all those things. But I'm tuning into your description of feeling the relief and the sense of not fighting or trying to prove things. Instead, there's what you described as a kind of inner graciousness. Feel that and sense that that's who you are. You know this.

And of course you'll get riled up. We all do at certain points. I'm Italian from New Jersey—it's part of our DNA. No big surprise about that. You can get riled up. But let this be your resting place. Let this be the kind of source code, if you will, underneath all that. For yourself, this graciousness and not trying to prove, but just being there as a loving presence and doing what you do.

Yes, and some of them will be kind and some of them will be difficult. But even that graciousness you have with people who are difficult, with those who are fighting—it helps in some way. You carry something beautiful in you, and you can bring it there.

Thank you. Thank you for your time.

Thank you. A pleasure.

fairly common that people who are attending somebody who's dying, especially if they're not conscious, they're there and then they have to go out and go to the bathroom or they have to go get something. And that's when the person dies.

"That was with my dad," she said. "The first night I left, after nine nights."

And that's partly, I think, because it's too hard to leave when somebody's there that you love. And it's like, "Okay, I need a little privacy. Thank you. I'm about to leave my body. I want you to feel this." So we have our needs—"Oh, this special moment"—but believe me, you'll have plenty of time with the body. It's okay. If you're there for that moment on the last breath, fine. If you're not, it's not like, "Oh God, you missed the train."

So that's the first thing to say. Because what really matters, and this is what you're talking about, is your presence. To the extent that you can be peaceful, hold their hand, be loving, breathe with them when they're still breathing—pairing your breath with someone is an amazing practice to do. Especially right after death, you get all these strange breath rhythms and things like that. But if you pair your breath with them, very gently breathing when they do, you start to feel an even deeper connection. And it's not the connection of your ideas, but just that energetic sense. Then you do it with a sense of metta and loving-kindness.

As they leave, I like to do a kind of blessing of loving-kindness in which I envision and sense them released from their body. And then the body becomes nothing—it just becomes, you know, dead. You can feel the spirit leave the body like a silent, amazing thing. And then to try to feel that, to somehow hold that spirit where they're going with trust and love, and say, "It's okay, let go. Let go into the light. Let go into the ocean of peace." I say it out loud sometimes.

And saying that—it's not complicated. There are all kinds of elaborate Tibetan things, but if you read the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Ars Moriendi from the Middle Ages, there are all these different traditions. What matters in the end is love and presence. Because that's what we look for when someone comes in and when they go out.

Now with your mom with Alzheimer's, I also have this feeling that the Tibetans talk about going through all these bardo experiences, right? They're not just when you leave your body. They're already there in dementia. In some way, she's not all here anymore. She's already entered the in-between and those states.

So when you're with her, in some way you can acknowledge: your body's here, and who you are is more than this. You're already out there somehow. And you don't have to try to pull her back. You can say, "I love you wherever you are" or something like that. You can actually sense this is organic, and she knows how to die. The body just knows how to breathe. It also knows how to let go and die. Sometimes it gets difficult, painful—

You get all those kind of last-minute spasms and things like that, death throes. Mostly people who've had near-death experiences and gone through and come back say, "Yeah, that was just my body. I was already mostly out of it, not in the body."

So you become the space of love. And the ocean of peace that you want her to let go into.

Close your eyes just for a second since we're talking. What's your mom's name?

"Carol."

And let yourself picture Carol and being with her as she gets weaker. And it may take a while, as you say. It could be a year or five years. You don't know. And there, finally, it's time. And you're there with her. And imagine that you're Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, just looking at her with kindly eyes, that all her incarnation is ending. And you're the field of loving awareness itself, peaceful and gracious. It's like, "Carol, you know how to do this. We're together. Dear mom, you know how. You know how to let go. You know how to be at peace. We can do this together."

How does it feel?

"It feels good. And what's beautiful about what you've said, and what's really helped me, is that I'm realizing she's been in this process for a long time. Because with my dad, I witnessed for him the last nine days, just looking up and speaking into the air to whoever was showing up for him, and his process of letting go. But what you've said has made me realize that she's been doing that for several years in her dementia, looking and talking in ways we don't understand. But I think that may have been parts of her letting go, just in a longer version. So when I picture us being there, I picture my sister and myself, but I also feel my dad in that room, which makes me think that it's not necessarily important that I'm physically in the room—because I will be in the room. We all will be in the room with her when it happens."

Beautiful what you say. It's really deep. And we're in this conversation about something so mysterious, mysterious to all of us. It's like you're turning and facing into the great mystery. We're not that personality. We're something so much more.

"Yes. And that connection is so real after someone passes. It's so near after someone passes, for quite some time. And that mystery is something really special to lean into."

Yeah. Thank you.

I've talked about this before, about how I was in Asia and knew that someone I cared about—I felt that they died. And then I got a message sometime afterward: they died in an accident. And I thought, how did I know that? And I've had other experiences. So I ask in a group, I'll say, "How many of you have the experience of knowing someone died at a distance, unexpected?" Lots of hands go up. It's incredible. Exactly what you're saying—that we actually are with each other. We're connected in that way. And you described it so beautifully. Thank you.

"Thank you."

So this is where we'll end tonight. It's a gift you give us to describe that.

"Thanks, Jeff."

I thank you, Chris. And maybe I'll be with you for a little bit too in that room, now that I know—with you and Carol and your sister.

"I hope you are. You blessed our first daughter, Ruby. So you have an important place in our life."

All right. Thank you.

So if you're interested, look on my website for that.

I'm just glad that we get to spend this time together. These teachings are ones that you already know—that you get to do something, make something beautiful of your life. And that's what they remind us of.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment. And if you like, you good-hearted people, you can unmute yourself and offer a little blessing or message to some of your fellow practitioners on the screen. Feel free.

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