Monday Night Meditation: The One Who Knows

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:40:31

Thank you, Christina. How great to see you all. Some of you are old friends in the little squares where you live, apparently. That's where I get to see you and know you these days. And I'm really pleased to be able to be together again on this Monday night.

Spirit Rock started thirty-some years ago to create a sanctuary and a place for people to develop and understand the practices of mindful loving awareness, loving kindness, and compassion—and how to actually live and embody them in their lives. Over these years, we've had all kinds of trainings and classes, as Christina was pointing out, in many different forms. And I think one of the most important things is simply that we come together, that we sit together in meditation, that we remind each other of these values of compassion, these values of a courageous heart, the values and the capacity for inner freedom. We practice them, and somehow they spread from our own lives out in all the ways that we touch the world.

So with this, I'm really grateful to be back. And I would like us to start as we usually do with a period of meditation.

Let yourself find a way to settle. Let your body find a posture that's upright and at the same time comfortable, if that works for you—or whatever posture will keep you present and is inviting of your steady attention. Take your seat here, halfway between heaven and earth, as if under your own tree of enlightenment, your own Bodhi tree.

Let your body begin to settle. Take two long breaths, and with each one, let ease and relaxation grow. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle and release your neck for a simple uprightness. Let your shoulders relax, and your arms and hands rest easily.

Allow the body to settle in this seat, on this earth, in this amazing day. Feel the weight of your body, the contact with the seat beneath you—the buttocks or feet, legs—and sense how you can let go and be completely supported by Mother Earth beneath you. Steady. Stable.

Let your belly be soft and the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion. Allow the mind to quiet and match the softening of the heart. Come more fully into the present moment, resting under your tree of enlightenment as the Buddha that you are—the awakening one.

Now notice how the earth is breathing you. You don't actually have to do anything. Simply notice with gentle attention how the body breathes itself in this ocean of air. You might sense the breath as coolness in

the nostrils, or swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or as the rise and fall of chest or belly. Feel how it breathes itself. Whatever rhythm it wants to take, let it do so. And with each breath, invite a sense of ease and calm.

As you quiet, sense the miracle of breathing. Your body is inter-breathing with the trees and the grasses around you. You breathe out carbon dioxide, which they breathe in. They breathe out oxygen, and you take it in. You're breathing with all life on earth. It is breathing you. You're breathing with the whales and with the breath of your ancestors. You're breathing with earthworms and pelicans.

Let yourself relax into the breath of life. Calm. Steady.

Notice that there are two different levels happening, two levels of experience. There's the feeling of the breath—this breath, the sensations in the body and movement, sound—each breath coming like a wave as the earth breathes you. And there is the knowing of the breath, the consciousness that notices and experiences the rhythm of the breath, slower or faster, the sensations.

There's the experience, breathing itself. And there is the mystery of awareness, of mindful loving awareness, that notices.

Rest in the stillness, settling and quieting. And of course, as you quiet and settle and feel the rhythm of breath, there will naturally arise other waves of experience.

Thoughts will come and go. Picture thoughts and word thoughts will come across the screen of awareness. Emotions will arise—restless, bored, anxious, happy, peaceful, steady—and all the sensations of the body and senses, waves of sound, tinglings in the body, warm and cool. In the middle is your awareness of this life breath, rising and falling, breathing in and out gently. Being breathed.

Let the mindful loving awareness now include the waves of experience that rise and fall around the breath—the longing or excitement or pleasure at settling, the tinglings or pain or throbbing in the body, the images of past and future, ideas, thoughts. You rest in the center with this breath and notice the waves as they come and go.

If it's helpful to stay present, you can gently name or acknowledge the stronger waves. As you feel the body being breathed, you can acknowledge sadness or excitement. You can acknowledge tingling, or hearing when sounds arise. You can acknowledge planning or remembering when thoughts come. As if to bow to them, you name them gently and feel them as a wave passing through the loving awareness, the mindful loving awareness that acknowledges as they arise, that notices and feels them—how long they last, how big they get—and notices as they pass away, how the body continues to be breathed, one breath after another.

And add in, if you wish, the quality of loving-kindness, so that whatever waves arise, whether painful or pleasant, thoughts or sensations or emotions, they're received with kindness. Pain is received kindly.

Anger is received with kindness—thank you for trying to help me. Fear is received with kindness—thank you for trying to protect me. Longing and love, memory—when they arise, receive them with kindness. Oh yes, this too. This too.

And you are the mindful, loving awareness itself, the field of consciousness that receives and acknowledges, that bows to, that knows what arises as it arises and passes away.

And finally, if you are comfortable doing so, place one hand on your heart. Let yourself feel the gratitude that you've had this opportunity, that life has given you in this turning world the chance to pause and stop and listen deeply with the mind and heart and body, to be present and feel what benefit may have come and does come from doing this.

Welcome back. Please let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable and let yourself listen again—not so much to take notes or remember anything, but to quiet and listen and sense if there is something you are reminded of that matters to you, that you already know. And let that inspire you or touch you in any way it might.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about a phrase that my teacher Ajahn Chah used at times. He called it "the one who knows"—the wise or conscious, liberated nature of our own heart and mind.

It seems fitting. It's just about summer solstice. And of course, we could talk about carrying the inner light—though it's only solstice in the north; it's winter solstice for those in the south who are listening. But there's something timeless about carrying light: the light of understanding, the light of liberation.

And having it also be the week of Juneteenth, when the last major populations of enslaved people in America—two hundred fifty thousand human beings in the state of Texas alone, enslaved, a third of the population—were finally liberated.

So we'll talk about our own knowing and the understanding of liberation, inner as well as outer. The outer forms of oppression and racism and the ways that people have mistreated one another—they stem from the human heart. And the transformation that's needed for humanity at this time more than any is a transformation of the heart.

I run into people periodically as I travel and go about my work, who often will come up to me, those who know me, with warm greetings, thank-yous, different things like that. Commonly they will say, "If I didn't have the Dharma, if I didn't have these teachings, if I hadn't practiced loving-kindness, if I hadn't practiced mindfulness—going through what happened with my parents or my family or my divorce or the accident—I just needed these so much. They made a huge difference."

It's beautiful to hear. And of course, it's the purpose of the teachings: to actually offer these things that transform our lives and become part of who we are.

Zen Master Seung Sahn Soen-sa-nim, a Korean Zen Master whom I first met in 1972 when I'd come back from the monastery and was in Cambridge—he'd come from Korea a couple or a few years earlier and landed in Providence, Rhode Island, but also taught in Cambridge at one of the Zen centers there.

It was there that I met Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1972, that I met my beloved Trudy Goodman and Larry Rosenberg—and Seung Sahn Sunim, which means "respected teacher." He would do dharma combat, this way he had of teaching where he'd say, "All right, who wants to talk about what they know?" Trudy said I was quite brash after coming back from the monastery and would challenge things he said. He would always demolish me, but it took a few minutes, so it was kind of exciting.

One of the phrases he loved to use was, "You already understand." He was speaking to that deep part of you that knows—that knows wisdom, that knows how to live, that knows the mystery. Not by figuring it out, but by standing in its grace.

Over these fifty years of teaching, my approach has evolved. In the beginning, I taught more as a kind of authority: here's a dharma talk on the seven factors of enlightenment, or the practice of anapanasati and mindful breathing. But if you read the Buddhist texts, while the Buddha gave teachings in that form—as did some of my great teachers in Asia—he also engaged in a great deal of dialogue, a kind of Socratic dialogue.

Someone came to him and asked, "What happens when you die?" Instead of blurting out some answer, the Buddha said, "Well, why did you ask?" The person replied, "I want to know if I should live a moral life. Does it matter in the end?" A fair question. And the Buddha said, "Well, if there's a life after this one, how do you think it will be determined?" The person reflected and said, "Probably by how I lived. So if I live a moral life, it might lead to a better rebirth." Then the Buddha asked, "How about if this is the only life? How would you want to live?" The person reflected again and said, "Well, if this is my only chance, I guess I want to live my best life." Through this kind of dialogue, the Buddha didn't give an answer, but rather inquired together with that person.

This is a quality and way of interacting I've learned now—to be less of the authority, although, talk to my daughter, my wife, my friends, and I can pull off the authority thing too. But when people have questions, I'll ask them: What have you learned? What would the wisest part of you say in answering this? Or I'll ask: Where do you hold this in your body, and how do you hold it? That question, that concern, those emotions. Then I might turn to the people around and ask what others have learned about this question. Something beautiful starts to happen in a group. The room becomes wise. It's not just one person—what have you learned? But what have others learned? And suddenly there's this shared understanding.

Some Buddhist texts begin with the phrase, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, you who are of the good families of the awakened ones"—which is your true history. What it means is that each one of you has the capacity to awaken, to remember dignity and freedom and love, and the nature of consciousness itself.

Robert Johnson, the celebrated Jungian author, writes about the shadow in the Jungian tradition—our worst fears and thoughts, the things we push away and don't make conscious, and what it means to see and learn about them. But he says, curiously, people resist the noble and positive aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide their dark sides. It's more disrupting to find out you have a profound nobility of character than to find out you're a bum. No slur on bums, by the way, but you know what he means with that metaphor.

So how do you live this? Rumi puts it simply: pay regular visits to yourself. It's what we started to do in our meditation tonight. And Lama Yeshe, that wonderful, great old Tibetan teacher from some decades ago, he looked at his students—he was very colloquial in his teaching—and said, "Hey, how many times do you check out what's in your refrigerator every day?" Then he asked, "How about checking out what's in your heart and mind as often as you look in the refrigerator?"

There's something about pausing and listening, as we did in our opening meditation. Taking the time to step back from our busyness and sense the mystery of being alive, and how we navigate it. Quieting down and asking: What wants attention? Because different things do. What wants understanding? And maybe, what wants love? You can reflect in yourself what wants attention and what wants love.

Of course, meditation is not just about getting calm and quiet. Those of you who've practiced for a while, especially Vipassana and mindfulness and mindful attention, know this. I remember Ajahn Chah in a BBC interview at his monastery saying, "Sitting is not just a sweet, calm thing to do."

Sometimes you're sitting in the midst of a raging storm—your grief, your fear, your anger, your concern for your life and the world and the grandchildren and the trees and everything else.

And so to sit, when we speak of the one who knows, is to expand what is called the window of tolerance. The one who knows says, "This is the human experience." It's the first noble truth of all the forms of suffering. Anybody not experienced that? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. And it's the third noble truth of the freedom in the midst of that suffering, of the end of suffering and the freedom beyond it.

And so you take your one seat in the middle of it all. You get the mundane problems of sleepiness—what one monastery I practiced in called "the poor man's nirvana." You don't judge it; you need it. You get restlessness and anxiety and fear, and you say, "Hey, fear, thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm actually okay right now. You can kind of calm down." As Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it seize in you as few ingredients can."

So you sit with it all. And at the same time, you sit with your joy and your dance, with the beauty of the world. You sit with your thoughts—as my friend Anne Lamott wrote, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone." So she sits in groups.

But you also sit with the cultural suffering, the cultural anxiety about climate change and political

divisiveness and continuing racism and so many other dimensions that we carry. What happens as you sit is that you're able to shift from the cultural trance.

Here's a passage from John Gatto, who was the New York City Teacher of the Year: "Think of the things that are killing us and our children. Drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all—lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as if it gives a sense of meaning." He said this is what our kids are being taught in our schools.

But what happens as you sit is that you wake up. The opposite of the word "truth" in Greek is *alethe—aleth e* means to sleep. And the word truth really means to wake up, to see the world as it is with its ten thousand joys, its magnificent beauty, and its ten thousand sorrows. To see our human lot in the midst of it. This is where the one who knows takes a seat. You look with the eyes of the Buddha and say, "Yes, this is our human lot." And you expand the heart to hold it all with kindness and compassion.

Then something very interesting happens. As you become the one who knows taking that seat, you shift from the content to see the process of life itself. "All things are impermanent"—the last words of the Buddha. And you start to see this. Even the big things—the cultural anxiety of divisiveness and climate, AI—they're all in change, and we don't know. We are in the middle of the story. You can't grasp and say, "This is the way it is and will be." The more you grasp things that change, you get rope burn.

Instead, you get the opportunity to see it with the eyes of an awakened one. Then you get to plant beautiful seeds in the midst of it. Yes, it's all impermanent. What can I do? If I hold on and get frightened, it creates more suffering—greed, hatred, fear, confusion. If I hold it with compassion and understanding, something entirely different is possible.

Now it's hard these days because there's so much insecurity. We don't know what's going to happen with climate or AI or with the person who's sick in our family or the healthcare system. It's not so much that humans are afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, writes one sage, but it's the place in between that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. We know where we were. We might look at where we're going. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer.

There's nothing to hold on to.

But what happens after we get to sit with the ten thousand joys and sorrows is that there also grows this capacity to see the whole dance of it in an amazing way.

Ariyaratne, who died a month or so ago—the great sage from Sri Lanka, a wonderful, amazing person, nominated for the Nobel Prize—in the middle of the Sri Lankan Civil War, he called all half a million of his followers together and laid out a peace plan that he called the Five-Hundred-Year Peace Plan. He said, "Not my lifetime, not yours. But we can plant seeds where we help one another in the villages, where we build roads, where we build schools, where we build love for each other. We learn each other's languages.

And after ten and twenty and thirty years, we start to see how we're doing. Then we economically help the poorest rise up and join those who have more wealth." He laid out a whole process. He said, "Every hundred years we'll pause with a council and see how we're doing."

From this perspective of the process, as Martin Luther King said, the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And the vision of Ariyaratne—that five-hundred-year peace plan—was magnificent. We're part of something so much bigger. And the one who knows in us recognizes this.

I just got back from being invited to teach at the Oslo Freedom Forum, which takes place where the Nobel Peace Prize is given in Oslo. But instead of one person being celebrated, they bring together forty activists—human rights activists, all of them eligible for a Nobel Prize. They come and share stories and support one another. There's the older generation: the former head of the Cambodian government who was ousted by a dictator, or the wife of Navalny, or a minister who did receive a Nobel Prize. But then there's this new generation of forty-year-olds and thirty-year-olds—these amazing human rights activists working to save the rainforests, working for justice around the world.

One woman came up to me who's been a huge figure in Latin America for saving the rainforest. She said, "Every time there's a huge new fire, the next day my menstrual period starts." There were people who came up to me who were Uyghurs working with a million Uyghurs who've been imprisoned in China, or people from Sudan and Syria. They said, "I have nightmares. It's so difficult. There's survivor's guilt." But the thing that most worried them was: "What about my compadres who are still in prison, even though I got out?"

Part of the work there that I was privileged to do was to say: there are inner practices. You don't need to carry the fires in your body. They belong to Mother Earth. She knows how to recycle them. You don't need to carry the prison in your heart. You can, as Nelson Mandela did when he walked out of Robben Island prison after twenty-seven years, say: they can imprison your body, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And so we did rituals and practices and trauma work and therapy—the things that would really help people. But it's not just them. All of us need to find our way to be the one who knows, to be the Buddha amidst this complicated and magnificent life.

Part of what happens is that the window of tolerance opens. We see the process of life—birth and death coming again and again and again. Then we set our directions. We plant seeds like Ariyaratne. There's suffering, and there's the overcoming of it. That was the passage of Helen Keller.

And then there's the invitation to step back, as we did in our meditation, and become consciousness itself. You know this. If you go look in the mirror, you'll notice you've aged. You lose fur in some places. Little wrinkles grow bigger. Your skin changes. Your body gets bigger or gets skinnier. It does all that stuff. It's aging.

But the weird thing is that you don't necessarily feel older. There's that feeling of: "Wow, look what's

happened to my body. Whoa." And that's because it's only your body that ages. Who you are is the one looking in the mirror going, "Well, it's losing its hair, its fur, it's changing"—or the hair moves to some other place, all the weird stuff that happens. But behind that is this consciousness that's saying, "Wow, look at what's happening in this life. I guess we're more than halfway through. I guess we're headed on the downhill side of the roller coaster."

There is a perspective of consciousness itself, and you see it. You become the loving witness of it. Instead of getting caught in all these things, you become the one who knows.

As Walt Whitman wrote, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

But who is this one who knows?

If you turn back and look, it's like being in the movie theater and you realize that there's light and awareness itself. It's born into your body. It leaves your body when you die. This is who you are. You are awareness and consciousness. Loving awareness.

Years ago, I was studying with Nisargadatta Maharaj, the sage in Bombay. He used to teach that what we took to be ourself and our identity was not who we were at all. We're not our body. We're not our culture. You can honor your body and feed it and care for it—it's precious. You can value your ancestors and your cultures. But he'd look at you and say, "Do you think that's who you are?" You asked me, am I afraid of death? He said, "You think this body made of chapatis and lentils and curries—you think that I'm made of curries and lentils? It's just not me." And he said it with such conviction. He said, "Who I am is beyond space and time." This is consciousness itself, outside of time.

So I went and did a long retreat for a couple of months, and I did this kind of radical practice of starting with the heart and doing radial sweeping, coming back to the center of things, and then dissolving into emptiness. You know, when you have time and you're young, you do weird things. And I came back high as a kite. I flew back to Bombay and sat down with him. He peered at me as he peered at people who came, and he said, "Ah, you're back. What's up?"

And I said, "I'm not back. It's all a dream. It just appeared and disappeared."

Whoa—that was like baiting the bear or something. "What do you mean? What do you think you know?" And he tested me in different ways. I said, "No, no, it's all just a play of consciousness." I was way out there after two months of this practice of going from one to zero and back. "It's all just the play of light, of space and time, and that's just consciousness."

Finally he kind of got it. He looked at me and said, "Pretty good." And then he said, "So now no more fear, ever, right?"

That got me. I sort of frowned. I thought, "Oh, maybe I could be afraid again."

He said, "Go sit in the back. You haven't finished yet."

If I were wiser at that time—but of course we all could say that about whole vast chapters of our life—I would have understood what I now know and said, "Fear arises. So what? It has nothing to do with me." And then of course he would have tested me some other way.

But there's something so beautiful about seeing the way things are. And the one who knows realizes, as we breathe, as we practice—St. Francis de Sales put it this way. He said, "What's needed is a cup of knowledge, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience." And the patience is really timelessness. There's no quick fix for this life or for this globe. The one who knows acknowledges the way things are—the unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears.

Mary Oliver writes: "What can I say that I have not said before? I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there is an unfinished story, and you are somewhere in it, and it will never end until it all ends. Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce, but also take it to the forest. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still."

I am of years lived so far—seventy-four—and the leaf is singing still. And this is really the invitation from the one who knows: unbearable beauty, the ocean of tears.

The Dakini speaks. The Dakini is the feminine wisdom figure.

"My friends, let's grow up. Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here—or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice. Look, everything that can be lost will be lost. It's simple. How could we have missed it for so long? Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings, but please let's not be so shocked by them. Let's not act so betrayed, as though life had broken her secret promise to us. Impermanence is life's only promise to us. Let us watch as things die and as they are renewed."

So the one who knows this says, "Hey, human incarnation—pretty cool. Pretty horrible. Pretty wondrous." And it also sees that life doesn't unfold by accident. There are causes and conditions. What we practice makes the future.

Sharon Salzberg tells the story of how she was practicing some months of loving-kindness meditation in Burma, repeating over and over, "May I be well and safe," extending these wishes to other people and things. Partway through her practice, she'd gone to receive her food that was placed in her hand. She went back to her little cottage and dropped it all on the floor—the plate smashed, everything scattered. She said to herself, "Sharon, you're such a klutz," which is sort of how she had viewed herself. But then the next thought came: "Sharon, you're such a klutz, and I love you." She said, "Oh, this stuff works."

What seeds we plant, what we practice—it makes the difference. This is your birthright: to know that it's possible to practice love and generosity in this amazing human life, and to let it be playful.

People think of spiritual life as some grim duty. I exercise, I have a new diet, I work out, I'm studying a new language to keep my memory sharp—all this stuff you do, right? But Ajahn Chah had such a sense of humor. The Dalai Lama—you come to see him and half the time he'll put his hand on your cheek, or if you've got a big mustache, he'll kind of tug on it or play with you and just start to laugh. Ruth Denison loved to get people up to dance.

Here's a story for you. In 1969—a long time ago, right when I went into the monastery—right out of graduate school, I was drafted into the US Army. After I got new clothing, a haircut, and vaccinations, I filled out a stack of forms. One asked for my religion. Naturally, I was worried about going to Vietnam. I decided to choose a new religion for myself. Feeling rebellious, I wrote: "Druid (reformed)."

Two weeks later, I received my dog tags stamped with my name, social security number, blood type, and "Druid Reformed." I wondered how the army would administer last rites for that.

Stationed stateside several months before shipping out, I was looking forward to a big date on Saturday night when the commanding officer canceled all weekend passes. A large anti-war protest was scheduled, and he was afraid a lot of his soldiers would attend. But I was determined to go on that date with my girl.

Discovering there was to be a full moon that weekend, I requested a two-day pass to celebrate a religious holiday. The commanding officer was skeptical. "What the hell religion are you?" he asked. I told him I was a Druid and that the last full moon before winter solstice was our high holy day. He demanded to see my dog tags, so I showed them to him. He looked at them in stunned silence for a moment, then granted me the pass.

As I was on my way out, he said, "Wait a second—don't you guys kill goats?"

"No, sir," I said. "That's the Orthodox. I'm Reformed."

You've got to laugh. You've got to play in this.

The Taoist Zhuangzi writes: "If you're crossing the river in a boat and an empty boat collides with your own skiff, you will not be angry, you will not be shouting and hurt. You'll just push it away. But if there's someone in that boat, you'll shout at them to steer clear, and you'll get angrier and angrier as it comes closer—all because there's somebody in the boat. But if the boat were empty, you would not be shouting, you would not be angry and upset."

If you can empty your own boat as you cross the river of the world, he says, no one will bother you and no one can truly harm you.

So there comes, for the one who knows, a sense of graciousness and generosity and ease, because what matters can't be taken from you. They can put your body in prison and you'll suffer. Believe me, these were people in Oslo. I was so touched because they'd willingly or unwillingly suffered for something that mattered so much to them. But in the end, what mattered was so much bigger than their suffering.

And this is your birthright—to see the world with the eyes of a Buddha, to see the whole of the world with the heart of the Buddha.

What matters in the end to the one who knows? There are really only a few questions at the end of life. Did I love well? Perhaps, did I learn to let go? Did I live fully? But did I love well is the question.

O nobly born, remember who you really are.

Nisargadatta again talked about this when he spoke about his own experience of freedom. "Wisdom tells me I am nothing—just the play of elements, the play of consciousness. And love tells me I am everything. And between these two, my life flows."

Here's Chief Seattle, and of course he meant to include women: "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man." And I got this when my daughter was in second or third grade. She said, "Daddy, I think you can use this in your talks." It's in her third-grade handwriting, so I treasure it.

But I'm also aware of Israel, Gaza, Palestine. When I was there doing peace work in Palestine and Israel, I met with the former combatants for peace—they're still going even today. I met with the bereaved mothers on both sides, the Jewish and the Arab, the Palestinian and the Israeli bereaved mothers. And they're all, in the end, just mothers. And it's still happening. This is not the end of the story. The violence is not the end.

The one who knows shifts from what's called the small self, or the body of fear, when we feel ourselves individual and separate from the world. We're afraid the heart can't bear it. We have to defend ourselves. But to open, as Hafez the poet says: "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions."

So you open. The one who knows says all of this can be held in the heart. For who we are is timeless awareness, loving awareness itself. Wisdom says, I am nothing, I am space. And love says, I am everything.

And this is not a philosophy. It's an experience, and something in you knows this and will know it when you die and you leave your body and go, "Wow, that was an incarnation. How about that one? Wonder what I learned from that one." Don't be afraid. Or you can be afraid, as Nisargadatta teased me, but don't be afraid of the fear. It's just another state.

Rilke the poet reminds us: ultimately, it is upon our vulnerability that we depend. The fears and confusions and the suffering of the world—they are to be experienced in this vast heart.

O nobly born, who you are is this knowing, is this deep wisdom.

Sometimes I suggest to people a practice: pretend you're enlightened. For the next week, just pretend. And

see what happens. Maybe you won't even go back from that. "You already understand," said the Zen master.

Take a moment to reflect. Think of a situation that's difficult in your life—and your life is not just your body's life, but your life in the world, wherever it is. Imagine yourself as the wisest figure you could be. Imagine that you turned into Mother Mary or Buddha or Nelson Mandela—whoever it is. How would you respond if you were Mother Mary? How would you respond as an awakened one?

While it is not your task to fix the whole world—that would be hubris—you are charged in this human form to reach out and mend or touch the places that you can, from this wise and loving heart.

Continue to reflect. Not only is that wisdom within you, the wisdom of the awakened ones, but where are you called to reach out, to touch, to mend? You can know. As the poet says, "The earth is too small a star and we too brief visitors upon it to do anything but love."

You do know. You already know. You already understand.

In the question period that followed, a student named Toby shared this reflection:

"I have studied your work for many, many years. And now, as I'm really getting older—not just imagining it—I'm finding that it's become much more internalized, probably because of the practices. What I've noticed is that because I have very deep feelings about what's going on in the world, I've said to myself: then do something for the people you're able to reach. People are so needy to be seen and to be deeply heard.

"My practice is about having the courage to tell them what I see. I find that even those who are deeply grieving or frightened, when you hear them, when you say 'I heard you, I saw you, I know what this means'—you don't have to have a solution. What you have to do is have the connection.

"I grew up as an only child, and what I've come to realize is there's no such thing as an only child. We're all so deeply connected that we may be in a family configuration that pretends otherwise, but even our next door neighbor has changed that illusion.

"I can use what you've been teaching about the one who knows to remind myself that I'm never going to be perfect—that's not on the agenda. But I should take the risk. I should listen.

"It doesn't have to be anything dramatic. I was at the zoo the other day, and I had a long walk to get somewhere and didn't know how. A staff member in a car rode by, and I stopped him. Obviously he was very annoyed at being stopped. But I asked him for directions and he was very precise. And I just looked at him and said, 'Thank you. You were so wonderful.' This huge, radiant smile came over his face. And I thought: don't not do this."

It's really important. So whether it's in my volunteer work or just in my everyday life, I see it everywhere. Sometimes my husband laughs if we're at a restaurant and a waiter is wonderful. I'll say, "Would you like me to tell your manager?" And he says, "Don't move, don't move—he's right over there. I'll get him for you."

I think that's the one thing we can all do: for each person we interact with, if we see it, say it. The only thing I would add, and this is very serious to me, is that if you see that kind of beauty and wonderfulness in people, you also very often see the other side—and you have a great responsibility not to misuse it. That's a separate issue. You can just stick to what's really special.

So thank you, because without your teachings, I'd still be home thinking about whether I should do it.

*Joseph:** I am really touched by what you say, by your spirit. I wrote down "there's no such thing as an only child," because it's a profound revelation and you express it exquisitely. Not only is what you talked about and the way you're doing it inspiring, but the other thing you've communicated is that it's fun.

*Student:** It is. It really is. And you surprise a lot of people while you're at it.

*Joseph:** You get to be some combination of Wavy Gravy and the Dalai Lama—you're actually bringing some beauty and joy into all those interactions. And it's fun.

*Student:** And it also makes me happy.

*Joseph:** Ah, that too. Yeah, that too. So thank you so much.

*Student:** Oh, thank you, thank you.

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*Joseph:** Pamela, would you like to unmute and come on?

*Pamela:** Hi. It's such an honor to be able to ask you a question.

*Joseph:** Sure.

*Pamela:** I'm grappling with a couple of things. I loved what you said about how you don't need to carry the prison inside your heart. I nearly lost one of my sons a year ago. I have twin boys and I'm a single mom. He's alive still, thank God, and healing. But he and his twin brother—I've always been the mom that did all the work, and I still do all the work. I manage a lot of medical stuff because he has a complex medical condition. And they're in this phase now, they're seventeen, where they want to spend more time with their dad than with me.

I'm really struggling. People keep telling me I need to let go, that they'll eventually come back to me. Our relationship is healing, but it's really hard. It's really painful. And I feel that I hold a lot of resentment and

anger because I do so much every day—I'm constantly managing the doctor's appointments and this and that.

I don't want to hold that resentment because I want to do it. My ex said to me today, "Well, I'll make the appointment." And I said, "No, I don't want you to make the appointment. I got it. I'm handling it." But it's like... yeah. So I don't know if you have any words of wisdom.

*Joseph:** Thank you. Yeah. I'm a twin. Are your twins fraternal or identical?

*Pamela:** Fraternal.

*Joseph:** Are they quite different?

*Pamela:** Very. Very.

*Joseph:** Yeah, I was quite different from my twin brother. He was a football player, star of the high school play. I played oboe in the orchestra.

So it was just very different. But I can feel the tenderness.

"Yeah. You've said so many things. First of all, as we talk, let me ask, where do you carry the pain around this in your body?"

"I mean, in my heart, I guess."

"What's it feel like? Close your eyes and not trying to change it, just being gently attentive. What does this pain feel like? How big is it? What's its..."

"It's big. It's huge."

"Is it hot or cold? Is it trembling? Is it fiery? What is it?"

"It feels like a prison. There are things that have improved and I'm so grateful for that. But I'm so wrapped in fear of losing them, or them not coming back to me."

"Yes. So feel that. Feel the prison and the fear that after all you've done, your children won't love you and won't come back. Feel it. And let me ask, how do you hold it? How do you touch that? Do you wish it wasn't there? Do you try to push it away?"

"It's a mother's fear."

"Close your eyes. This is deep mother's pain, saying, 'I love them. And I just have to hold on to them because that's my job.' So you feel all of that. And now what happens if you hold that with compassion? Not trying to fix it, you're just loving and saying, 'I know how frightened you are, and I'll hold you kindly, and it's okay—you can feel all these things.' See what happens if you're kind to it. Does it like that?"

"Yeah."

"All right, so notice that. Now notice the next thing, as you listen and feel. There's something about trust. You think you're in charge because you've had to be for a long time, right?"

"Yeah."

"You're not really in charge much anymore."

"I know."

"Okay, let's take that in and see how that feels."

"It feels really crappy."

"It does, doesn't it? Because that means—who would you be if you're not in charge? Who's left? Tell me."

"I don't know."

"Yeah, so be with that don't know. There would be a tender place, and 'I've had this identity and I've had to fight for this identity in the lives of my twins.' Now, 'I don't know who I am.' They kind of don't want you to be that old person anymore. They're growing up, and even your ex is trying to do something, and you still want to be that woman. Now, if you were really kind to her, if the wisest part of you could speak to that woman... If Mother Mary and Quan Yin would say something to that woman who's worked so hard, what would they say?"

"I guess you have to move on to something else."

"So take a breath and then say that again—like the bodhisattva, the goddess of infinite compassion who knows the hearts of mothers—say it again."

"I guess you can take a break, but there are things I can't take a break on, you know..."

I think Mother Mary doesn't quite buy that. Yes, of course there are some things, but feel that. That's actually the part of you that's terrified to let go. Hold that with great kindness, because you've needed to have that. And say, "Thank you. Thank you. It'll be okay."

And it will, actually. It's not in your hands anymore.

"But one of them has a complex medical thing..."

Yes. And you do what you can, and you let your husband—your ex-husband—do some things. Maybe he won't do it as well as you, but he's their father. And you alienate them all, you know this, by clinging so much. How would they all respond if you let go of some?

"They'd be happy."

This is the one who knows. They'd be happy. Could you be happy?

"I guess."

That's a very soft, tender, sweet "maybe."

"All right..."

Well, you see, you already know. You already understand. And it's hard. But you actually have to become somebody different than who you identified with in your role—which you needed to be. And you need to say thank you to your heart, your strength, and your body for doing it. But basically, the game's over now for that part. You've got to be a different kind of parent. And they'll be happy, and you'll be happier eventually.

"Thank you so much."

Thank you. I'm so touched. I feel how deep your love is. Now it's time to match that deep love with the wisdom that you carry.

"Thank you."

Do we have time for another question? One more.

I want to add something. As we were ending that exchange, I found myself wishing I'd had her imagine that Quan Yin or Mother Mary—whoever resonates—could wrap their arms around her and say, "We understand. We understand that you could feel that." Because it's not just you, it's all mothers, right? And these great beings have all been mothers. They would say, "It's okay. We've all done this. And we've also all learned to let go."

Thank you. Okay. Let's see who comes next.

Todd, would you come on and ask your question or make a comment?

"Yeah, Jack. So I'm not so much a father right now as a grandfather. I also have two wonderful sons who I'm still in their lives. One has two sons, and I have a third grandson. He's almost three, and my wife and I spend a lot of time taking care of him. He is just the most amazing, joyful little guy. And my oldest grandson is about to graduate high school tomorrow night."

Wow.

And he was a great athlete. Like you said, your brother was the football player—he was a great basketball player and baseball player. And I watched his every game since he was five and worried and worried every single game. I couldn't even enjoy it because I'm a worrier. And I worry about my grandson—he's such a bundle of joy. He has his meltdowns and I worry about him.

So you started this whole thing by saying that people come up to you and say, "I really need the Dharma." And I really need it, really need it too. I've been following you for many, many years. I've taken—you don't know me, but I shared a little bit once with you here. I've been doing the stewardship thing on Monday nights for a few months now. And I really need this. I'm not new to it. I've been doing various spiritual practices for fifty years. But for me, it's so much more just the hope that I could go past all this.

A lot of fear as I get older. Fear of old age, sickness, and death—all that stuff. A lot of fears. It's hard for me to enjoy my life because I'm so fearful. And unlike the woman who just shared, things are actually going really well. I haven't had bad things happen. Everything's going well. I have this wonderful marriage—I've been married for fifty-two years—and I have a wonderful family. They're all doing well. But I worry so much about all of it. And for me, the Dharma that I need so much is more just the hope. Just to be in these conversations, a hope that somewhere there is less suffering.

Okay. So, question. What is the benefit of all that fear, having it go for so long? What do you get from it?

Nothing. It's bad.

Yeah. Okay. So that's a reflection for you, for yourself. Because I think when we cling to things—I mean, some of it is that your body's on alarm and you've got fight, flight, or freeze going all the time. So there's a physiological part. But also, it's familiar. You're comfortable with it. This is how you navigate the world. And hopefully the world has been okay because you've been worrying about it. And if you didn't worry about it, maybe it would fall apart. Maybe it needs you to sit on the sideline and worry the whole game, and that makes it go better or something like that. I'm not quite sure what it is.

So yeah, close your eyes for a moment. And tell me, as you tune in, where do you carry the worry and fear in your body?

It's all in my stomach.

It's in your stomach. What's it feel like?

Just tight.

Tight.

"So bring a kind attention to it, almost like you were holding a child who was frightened and curled up in a ball and scared. You're just going to hold them kindly, as if to reassure them in some way. That holding gives us a sense that they're recognized, they're held, that something bigger can hold them. Notice what happens as you hold it kindly. See if anything happens. Just be curious. Does it like it?"

"Well... in this moment, it feels a little better doing that. But it's kind of like I know that it's not going to be like this tomorrow."

"Slow it down. In this moment, stay with it. Keep your eyes closed."

"It feels good. But then the worry comes in and says, 'Yeah, but that's BS. I'm coming. My channel is full tilt open. And as soon as this is done, I'm coming back on.'"

"But first, stay right where you are. To actually pay attention and bring kindness to it soothes, it softens, it opens. Now, imagine that you could take that worry—for the moment, we're just playing with it—and put it in the lap of some great spiritual figure, like the Buddha or the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Whoever you choose—that's just mine, but it could be anybody. And say, 'All right, I've got so much worry and I know it doesn't really help so much. Will you carry it for me?' Imagine that you were to put it in the hands of the wisest and most loving being that you could imagine and say, 'Would you hold this for me for a little bit?' And see what it would be like in your imagination to take it outside of your body and place it in the lap of this wise being who said, 'Yeah, I hold a lot of stuff. It'll be okay.' Notice what happens."

"I'm not sure that if I say I'm noticing something, I would be honest. I feel like I should say something."

"No, you don't have to. What you're noticing is that that doesn't work for you."

"Yeah. It's just still there."

"Right. Okay, so put two hands on your belly. We'll go a different route. Okay, and say, 'I understand you're trying to keep me safe. Thank you. I understand you're trying to keep me safe and the people I love safe. Thank you.' Because that's what it's trying to do. 'Thank you. You've been working really hard to keep me safe. Thank you.' And now say the next thing: 'In this moment, with my eyes closed, listening, talking with Jack—in this moment, I'm okay. In this moment, you can relax a little bit. It's okay.' As you thank it and say, 'Thank you for doing so much. You can relax. It's okay.' And notice what happens."

"It feels better. It softens."

"Okay. One more question. What does the wisest part of yourself—the advice from the wisest part of your being—want to say?"

"That there is hope in these practices to get beyond this fear."

"Yeah. And it's not that you're going to get rid of the fear."

But you can notice even now, when you said, "Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay right now. Thank you for keeping me safe"—the fear is there, but who you are is bigger than that fear. You're this part that's wise and witnessing and compassionate. You can say, "Yes, I know you've been helping me. Thank you." And I'm okay. A bigger part of you can say, "I'm okay." So you don't have to get rid of it, but you become someone larger and wiser—which is who you are.

"I'm going to add this one about 'thank you.' I have many practices that I try to put into my mind all the time, many things that come from you and many other Buddhist teachers. And I'm going to add this one—thank you. Thank you for the fear."

Remember to put your hands on your belly when you do it, on your gut, and say, "Thank you. I'm okay just now. You can relax somewhat. And thank you for taking care of me." Really make it a physical practice because you can't just do it in your head. You have to feel it and do it in your body.

You're a good dad. You're a good grandfather. You're a good human being. So things are okay. And you will die—it's true. You'll get old and sick and you'll die. And everybody does. Not a problem. This Ajahn would say, what do you think? You think that's not natural? You'll be fine. Your job really is to love. And you have so much of it. So much care comes out of you. And now you can even love the fear and say, "Thank you. We'll be okay."

That was the last question for this evening. Thank you all for attending. Thank you for your good hearts. The world needs us to wake up, needs human beings to care in a whole bigger, more wonderful way. And we can only do that together. There's no such thing as an only child—I love that expression. So brothers, sisters, siblings, take care of yourselves this week. The summer solstice, Juneteenth, celebration of freedom—let it be inner and outer.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for your good hearts. The world needs us to wake up, needs human beings to care in a whole bigger, more wonderful way. And we can only do that together. There's no such thing as an only child—I love that expression.

So brothers, sisters, siblings, take care of yourself this week, the summer solstice, Juneteenth, celebration of freedom. Let it be inner and outer.

Thank you.

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