The Laughter of the Wise: Emptiness and Form

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:37:36

And Spirit Rock, of course, not only welcomes you, but we have beautiful retreats on the land. And now that we're open again, more or less post-COVID, I can't recommend enough what happens when you come on a silent retreat in this beautiful valley.

So what we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We meditate or sit with a little bit of guidance for about half an hour or so, then take a break, stretch or relax for five minutes. And then there's some teachings and time for questions and dialogue.

Whatever brings you, it's a pleasure to welcome you wherever you are in your life—both geographically, emotionally, communally. All parts of you are welcome, all of your rather extraordinary web of life now invited to come into the present here, this moment with one another and yourself.

So let's sit together, if you would. Please let yourself find a way to settle. Let your body be stable, supported, and also at ease. You don't have to get into any weird posture to do this. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it from your meditation.

And once you find yourself settled, if you're comfortable, let your eyes close gently, or at least leave them downcast. Take two or three long breaths and bring the mind and body and heart together just here in the reality of the present—which is all we really have. The rest is just thoughts of past and future, but here, just where you are.

Let yourself begin to open to the reality of the present, to your experience. It's helpful to relax the body somewhat. Let your eyes and face be soft.

Loosen the jaw. If you like, you can roll your head in a little circle and release your neck. Let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your body on the seat, wherever you are, and how gravity pulls you to mother earth—and how, at the same time, the earth completely supports you. You can relax just where you are, just where you're seated. Let the belly be soft, the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

And now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of being alive, just here and now. Notice how the earth, how life itself, is breathing you. You don't even have to do it. You're being breathed. And each breath, in and out, breathes together with the trees and the grasses, with the cats and dogs and wolves and octopus and all that lives. We're all breathing together. Feel it, and relax into it. You can rest

and trust in the breathing.

As you bring your mindful, loving attention to the body breathing itself, very kindly invite the quality of calm and steadiness, of ease. You can even whisper it as the body breathes itself: *Calm. Ease.* Let the breath settle, and the whole energy of being come to rest here on the earth, in this moment. Calm and ease, inviting a sense of relaxation, graciousness with each breath.

You don't have to make the breath do anything. Let it have its own life, its own rhythm. Sometimes short. Sometimes longer. Sometimes loose and easy. Sometimes constricted. Sometimes slow. Or faster. Let it breathe itself, and you are the loving awareness, resting in ease and calm as the breath breathes. Steady, kind attention, just noticing. Resting in a calm, mindful, loving awareness.

You can also begin to notice all the waves of experience that rise and fall around the breath. Sometimes you'll feel the breath very directly. And sometimes a wave of thoughts—plans, concerns, issues, memories—will rise up. And as you notice that wave, you can even name it gently: *thinking* or *planning, imagining, remembering*. And let it rise and fall. You don't have to surf it or go anywhere with it. You just notice it. And then again, feel the breath, how it breathes itself in the midst of it all.

And just as your mindful and loving attention can feel the breath breathing itself, and can notice the waves of thoughts that come and go around the breath, notice too the emotions and feelings: sadness, excitement, longing, frustration, sweetness, peacefulness, joy. And when the feelings become like strong waves, let go of the breath as your focus and name them gently: *sadness, sadness* or *excitement, excitement* . Feel it as a wave of energy. Just as the breath breathes itself, so the feelings arise and fall like waves of the ocean. And the breath breathes itself in the middle of it all. Relaxed, gracious and easy.

You are the mindful, loving awareness that notices the breath coming and going, that notices waves of thoughts and feelings as they rise for a time and pass away, that notices too the ever-changing field of sensations, which is how you experience the body and senses. And like the breath that breathes itself, the tingles and vibrations, the warm and cool, the contractions and opening—the whole field of sensations floats in the mindful, loving awareness, the space of awareness itself.

Relax. The breath breathes itself. You simply notice, calm and steady. The waves of thoughts and emotions, the sensations of the body—they rise and fall around the breath like waves of the ocean. And you are the space of loving awareness: open, gracious, steady amidst it all.

From this quiet place, you can ask what wants your loving attention. You can know what in the body, in the heart, in the mind calls to you. And as you allow yourself to listen and know, let the loving awareness become compassion and kindness. For you know what to do and how to respond. You are the wise one. Steady. You are awareness itself.

So tonight, as usual for these teachings, I'd like you to sense them more as a reminder or a reflection or a meditation—just to let yourself listen and sense what feels true to you, what's helpful and what's not. Toss out what doesn't serve you, let it go. The whole point is to actually communicate and touch each other's hearts and minds in ways that benefit, and let the rest disappear.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the laughter of the wise, about the nature of emptiness and form. So it's a little bit of a deeper talk, if you will, than some others recently. Often I've been teaching about the Bodhisattva and the commitment to serve this world from the awakened heart. Tonight is a different perspective on the understanding of wisdom.

It's pretty wild times out there. And of course, the question for us is how do we navigate? How do we hold this? There's the changing political landscape that's really dramatic. Divisiveness in politics and elsewhere. There's climate change. There's continuing racism and injustice. There's wars—Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, and other places. Plato said, "Only the dead know the end of war." Hard to say, but it pretty much describes my experience in seventy-nine years of this world. There's refugees. There's all the kinds of struggles in our communities.

How do we navigate? We want to help. We want to make a difference. We offer money. We offer our time. But also, it's overwhelming.

There's an African story about a village alongside a river. When the river rose and flooded much of the village, one man was sitting on a rock by the edge of the torrent of water. The hands sticking out of the river were his sister, his mother, his daughter, his brother, his wife—and he could only reach for one or two hands. That's tough, isn't it? But it also maps a little bit where we are. You want to help somewhere and you can, and it's a beautiful thing. But what about all those other hands reaching out?

Take a pause here. This is our human predicament in samsara, in this world.

And so we sit in meditation. Yes, in part for stress reduction—mindfulness-based stress reduction, as Jon Kabat-Zinn called it. And we need that.

And the sitting we just did was beautiful. But the word Vipassana also means to see clearly—to see our own mind and heart, to see the ways that we get entangled, to see the ways we get free, and to see the same in the society around us: the entanglements and the possibility of liberation.

When we see clearly, we see suffering and we also see joy. And as we see clearly, we can foster the causes that increase wellbeing and happiness, and release those that cause suffering. But we have to stop and look, and look around, both deeply in ourselves.

Yesterday I was out on my deck watching the shimmering nearly full moon that did look like a round cheese near the horizon. It had that nice cheese-like yellow color. Remember as a kid, you were told that's what it was made of? And over the lagoon, I felt somehow how that same orb, that little planet that circles

ours, was also being seen at different hours this same day in Jakarta and Johannesburg and Jamaica and Jerusalem. We're all on this little blue globe floating in a vast sea of space, circling around our star with another little globe circling around us. And it's pretty mysterious when you pause and you look.

Even if your circumstances are easy—the economics of your life, the class, the caste, the geography, wherever you are—even if you're somewhat easy and blessed, you can't really be at ease. Because as Archbishop Tutu says, when someone asks, "How are you?" in South Africa, he said, "We always answer in the plural. We are well, or we are not well." He said, because we're so connected. If I say we are not well, it's because my grandmother is sick or my brother had an accident. And you asked me, how are you? And I say, we are not so well. You understand what I'm saying? Because you know this, that there's suffering. Parents who can't feed hungry children, thousands of refugees in Sudan, thousands and thousands, refugees all over—there is suffering. And no matter how much we might remove ourselves, it touches us because we're not separate. We have to say we are well or not well together.

How do we hold this? Suffering isn't the end of the story.

In the course of this hour or two that we gather together, there are Bodhisattvas doing extraordinary work to care for others. And there are ordinary Bodhisattvas. In one or two hours, there will be 2.6 billion acts of kindness. Parents putting tortillas and cassavas and oatmeal and rice and Cheerios on the breakfast table for children. People who open the door for another, who pass each other with a sense of kindness. That's also who we are. Yes, there is suffering, but it's not the whole story and not even the end of the story.

So let's take this reflection a little bit deeper. The most recited verse in the Mahayana Buddhist temples, especially the Zen but elsewhere too, is the Heart Sutra. And it begins with Avalokiteshvara there on Vulture's Peak, offering teachings, having been asked by the Buddha to awaken all to what is called the perfect heart, the heart of perfect wisdom.

And Avalokiteshvara begins: Form is not different from emptiness. And emptiness is not different from form. That which is form is emptiness. And that which is emptiness is form. Feelings, perceptions, thoughts, memories, experiences—all things.

What is emptiness? It's a little bit like a fish saying, "What is water?" And here's the remarkable thing. Do you know what fish are made of? They're made of water. Everything that makes all these sharks and squids and urchins and all the amazing things that we see in the ocean actually is a consolidation, thanks to DNA and all kinds of miraculous things—it is water taking new forms. So the fish say, "What's water?" And it turns out they are water.

So what is emptiness? If the fish says, "What's water?" and we say, "What is emptiness?" Emptiness is taught as a liberating teaching. Because as we look at our life, we're busy worrying, planning, concerned, remembering, trying to organize.

And these days I meet people with a tremendous amount of anxiety and worry. When you quiet the mind and look more deeply, then you start to see that you can't figure it out with your mind in the way that you try to. Because you want to figure it all out and make it safe for yourself. That's what the mind does—it's sort of a safety machine. Let me anticipate and get through this as best as I can and minimize trouble.

But you all know that story of the Chinese horse, right? There is this prosperous farmer. He gets married, he has his son, and everyone says, "Fantastic, he's so fortunate!" Not only does he have a farm, he's got some horses, and he has a boy, which in China was a special thing. But then a wild horse got interested in the horses that the farmer had and came sniffing around, and they caught it. The son caught it and brought it in. And now the farmer had three horses, and everyone said, "He's so lucky! He's got a boy, he's got three horses."

And the young man then decided to break in the horse. He was riding it and he fell and broke his leg. And now everyone said, "Oh, he's so unfortunate. He had this beautiful horse that came, he had this son, and now he fell and broke his leg. Who knows how he'll be limping. How unfortunate." Three weeks later, the local warlords came through town, taking all the young men off to battle—but the farmer's son couldn't go because his leg was broken. And they said, "Oh, he's so fortunate now." And I could go on with the story. You don't know. I mean, it's extraordinary.

And what this speaks to is called the wisdom of uncertainty—or by Zen master Seung Sahn, he called it "don't know mind." The mind that's open, that's not so rigid, that doesn't worry. "I know what's gonna happen in this election." Well, guess what? In one week—a terrible assassination attempt. And assassinations are horrible and they change the course of history like that. The stepping down of the current president. It was just one tiny little week in the wildness, and you thought you knew.

So emptiness—it's not a philosophy, but it's more tuning you to the experience of the way that life is.

"For years and years, I struggled just to love my life," wrote Mary Oliver, the poet. "And then the butterfly spoke, don't love your life too much, as she rose weightless in the wind." Don't hold on too tight. So much in that poem—the struggle to love oneself, but to do so not by grasping.

Because think back. Remember when you were a teenager? And all the opinions and views and hurts and longings and love and struggles. And then your twenties and your thirties, and it all seemed so real at the time. And then your life passes—oh wow, middle school, I remember that. That was like a different incarnation. Relax, baby. This is a journey. It's not something to hold on to.

So back to that river—the African River. Now we're at a different river, the river Ganges. And the Buddha walks along with a group of monks and nuns. And he says, "See the bubbles that float on the edge of the Ganges River?" And they said, "Yes." And he said, "Those bubbles are your thoughts, your feelings, your experiences, your days. They appear, they're there for a while, and they're gone. This is the nature of things."

Or as the Diamond Sutra says: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow—things appear and they disappear. And you know this. It all dissolves.

What happened to Y2K?

It's back with the dinosaurs, with the triceratops and the trilobites. What happened to the Mayan Empire and the Aztec and the Roman and Kublai Khan? They were magnificent. Gone. Ozymandias—all gone, you know?

Notice, it can all change in a moment. An earthquake, a comet, an assassination—we hope not—a volcano. All these things. This is the nature of samsara. We tend to feel it's so solid, but it doesn't last. This is part of the mystery of emptiness—that things are here and then they're not here.

And you know who that includes? As Miss Piggy would say, *moi*.

In the Mahabharata, it speaks about the great mysteries of life. And at one point it says, among the mysteries, here is one of the greatest of all: that human beings can see people die all around them and think that it won't happen to them. We kind of know it, but when you get the diagnosis and it's near the end, you go, "Whoa, I sort of expected it, but not so soon. Not like this, not like everything."

It's like the very rich man who died, and people in the neighborhood were saying, "Well, how much did he leave?" And somebody who was kind of wise said, "Why, everything, of course. That's what you leave. You leave it all."

So as you sit in meditation, yes, you can quiet, there's stress reduction, but it's not an errand to get somewhere. And it's not a grim duty. It's a pause in the mystery of life, because it all seems so solid. And yet when you quiet and notice, there's waves of pleasure and anticipation and planning and anxiety and remembering. There's waves of tension in the body and softening. There's all kinds of insights. But when you step back, the insights themselves and all the thoughts and feelings that come—they start to become like waves of the ocean. And that's what life is. You're on the shore, and the waves come in and out.

Here is a reading from your high school days. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, now at the end of his journey. He was listening deeply, and he sat by the river where he was learning from the ferryman:

He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything. He felt he had now completely learned the art of listening. He'd often heard all this before, all the numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer separate the different voices—the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation, the groan of the dying. They were all interwoven, entwined in a thousand ways, and all the voices and goals and yearnings and sorrows and pleasures, good and evil—they were the music of the world, the stream of events. And when Siddhartha listened to this river, to the song of a thousand voices, when he did not grasp just one—the sorrow or the laughter—but heard

them all, the whole, then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: harmony, perfection, the laughter of the wise.

And you sit, and your life becomes pixelated. You see the screen and then moments of thoughts and moments of sensation and vibration of the body and sounds. The more closely you attend, the more it becomes vibrations. It dissolves. Again, the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in the summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, and a dream.

And it is dreamlike. You'll see when you die and float out of your body, and there's this like, "Wow, that was a trip, that incarnation. Amazing. Look at that." You'll see. You don't have to believe me. Just wait.

So the point, if it's a dream, is what? The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. The question isn't the next election cycle. The question isn't the resolution of this war or that. It's a recognition of something so profound—the dance of eternity, the play of consciousness. And instead of being confused and depressed and anxious and all those things, you can step back and say, "Wow, look at samsara."

What a dance, baby. What a dance.

And as Siddhartha said, with all the joys and sorrows and groaning and sweetness, all of it—this is the river of life. It's how it is. And it is like a dream because you can't find 2023. It is gone. In fact, you can't find June. You can't find July 19th. It's gone.

And so what do you do? Where do you rest? Yes, there's a wisdom of insecurity.

My teacher Ajahn Chah went to see the greatest master of the day of the forest monasteries, Ajahn Mun, and he told him about all the experiences he'd had—the insights and light and dissolving his body and understanding impermanence and seeing the forms of suffering, and what it meant to live in this way and that, and the images that could come. Ajahn Mun listened and said, "Chah, you missed the point. These are just experiences. You're sitting there, it's like you're in the movie and there's a Western and a documentary, a nature movie and there's a romantic comedy and there's a war movie. You're seeing all these movies, but there's only one question: To whom do they happen? Who's watching the movies? Turn your attention back and become the awareness itself, which is what you really are. You are consciousness."

Now, if you want a little hint, go look in the mirror—I like to say this—and notice that you've aged. Get real about it. The hair turns different colors or just vanishes like it can. The wrinkles appear, your body changes. And you have this experience—it doesn't matter, you can be in your 20s or 30s and have it—that you look a bit older or a lot older, but you don't feel older. You know that experience? Why is that? Because it's only your body that's aged. But the consciousness, which is what you are, is timeless.

And so you look and you say, "Whoa, look, it's lost its fur. It's sagging here. It's doing what it does." But

that's not who you are. And you know that in a moment. You might rue it and say, "Gosh, I wish I had all that luxurious hair I had when I was a teen." But that's not the deal. You realize that you just rent the body from Hertz. Then you have to turn it in again, or whoever rents it to you. Your karma rents it to you, maybe.

But what happens is you become the witness to it all. You become the consciousness. And you get kicked into it sometimes—when there's an accident, when there's a diagnosis, when you take psychedelics, when something shocking happens. You go, "Whoa, I forgot. This is like a dream, it's changing. Anything could happen." The solidity starts to break apart.

And what happens instead is you become a loving witness of it. As Sri Nisargadatta, my teacher in Bombay, said, "When you understand, you will realize as I do: wisdom says, I am nothing." You're not separate from it all. You're just a play of consciousness, not who you think you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. And love says, I'm everything. That is all.

And this isn't a philosophy—it's actually an experience.

Many of you know this from the times when you've gotten quiet and something remarkable or difficult happened. And you go, "Oh, wow, it's not quite how it seemed—this solid." Who are you? There's the question.

We have so many things that we identify with, that we identify ourselves with. I'm a man or a woman. I'm a son or a daughter. And when you're in the room with your parent, you're a son or a daughter—that's who you feel yourself to be. I'm a sister or a brother. I'm a teacher sometimes. A student when you listen. I'm young-ish. I'm old. I'm gay or straight or trans or non-binary. I'm a Republican or a Libertarian or a Democrat or something else. I'm black, I'm brown, I'm yellow, I'm red, I'm white.

Forget it. All those identities need to be honored and respected, but that's not who you are. That's just your body. Those are the roles that you play at different times. I'm the boss. I'm the worker. I'm the social change agent—wonderful. I'm also at the effect of the society at large. Who you are is so much bigger than you think you are. Those are all just costumes you put on for a certain moment.

My dear friend Ari Ratana, who is the great sage of Sri Lanka and the best community organizer in all of Asia, during the long civil war in Sri Lanka between the Hindus and the Muslims and the Buddhists—he was a Buddhist elder, but really a celebrated elder, and he used his home to shelter some of the Muslim leaders from the Tamil Tigers.

One day, the military came to his door and knocked on it, people in uniform. His daughter opened the door, his teenage daughter, I think fifteen. They said, "Where's your father?" She said, "He's not here." They said, "We know you're harboring people. We want to come in and see who you have in the house." She said, "My father wouldn't allow you to do so, but he's not here." They looked at her and said, "Where's your mother? We need to talk to her and come in." She said, "My mother isn't here either, and she

wouldn't allow you to come in."

Then they said, "We need to come in." And she looked at them and said, "This is what my father would say. And I say it to you: you will have to kill me first before I will let you come in or harm any of these people."

Imagine—a teenager. But his spirit was so strong and so beautiful that it lived in her. You are bigger than you think you are. You're not these small roles. You undertake them, but you also have a huge heart. The real you is loving awareness and joy, and you can use it and embody it.

Thich Nhat Hanh says we're just playing hide and seek, all these roles. Sometimes I'm the girl on the refugee boat who throws herself into the sea after being raped by the sea pirate. And sometimes, he goes on, I'm the sea pirate with no compassion in my heart. I am all of these. And I weep as I tell you this.

"If only it were all so simple," said Alexander Solzhenitsyn. "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously

committing evil deeds, and it were necessary just to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being—and who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. You are *ariya ratana*—you are the noble one.

Yes, it's all tentative. It's all constructed in some kind of remarkable way. It appears, it's like a dream. Why care, then?

Because as you become the loving witness of it all, as you rest in consciousness, that wisdom brings tenderness. The Heart Sutra goes on, after saying "Form is emptiness and emptiness is not different than form—it all evaporates, it's not solid"—then it goes on to say: "And form is form, and emptiness is emptiness." This is the paradox. The form is also form. And we live in this extraordinary paradox.

Marpa, one of the greatest of ancient Indian-Tibetan sages, talked about the emptiness of all things. And then his grandson was killed and died, and he wept uncontrollably for a time. His students said, "Master, you told us it was all empty." And Marpa looked back and said, "Yes, and the death of a child is one of the most intense emptinesses you will experience." And he continued to weep.

This world—it's filled with unbearable beauty and blazing love and an ocean of tears. But it's the only place that I know of in all the circling galaxies where you can fall in love, where you can eat baked Alaska, where you can see an anaconda and an octopus. Not only can you fall in love, but you can break your heart too. Where else can you do this but in this earthly realm?

And I have to say, one of the most improbable things for me, and one of my favorites, is fireflies. I mean, think of it—let's have some bugs and put little blinking lights on them. Come on! How did this happen? It's

so remarkable.

And yes, there's the ocean of tears, and there's the innocence of children that can't be taken away. If you watch young children run around, or you watch puppies and kittens and otters and wolf cubs—amazing. They play, there's a kind of innocent joy, a wonder, a beginner's mind, because this earth, the form of it, keeps recreating itself. And you get to be the witness of it in this time, in this incarnation—and probably quite a few more times. So you hang out, you'll see.

So why care? Because where else can you eat baked Alaska? And where else can you feel that profound tenderness when you look in the eyes of another being—whether it's the tenderness of love or the tenderness of compassion—because you're all connected.

So you realize emptiness and the inevitability of suffering. Anybody not seen that? Please raise your hand. You know, it's vast. But so is the innocence of children and the wonders of every forest and ocean.

And so how do you function? You function in a different way. I was showing some martial arts movies to a friend of mine who's a martial artist—films of O Sensei, Ueshiba Morihei O Sensei, the founder of Aikido. He was this tiny little guy, four foot nine inches, with a white patriarchal beard. He would invite the great martial artists of that time in Japan to come and see his art demonstrated.

In one scene I watched, he was surrounded by twelve or thirteen big guys—masters of judo and karate and other martial arts. And he said, "Okay." He said, "When I signal, bring it on."

He stood there, he signaled with a nod, and they moved in to attack him. And the strange thing is, it's like watching Obi-Wan Kenobi—he turned in a circle and they all fell down. Their eyes were wide with bewilderment: what happened? I watched it many times. How could this be? But his chi, his energy—and he said it's the energy of love, really, that doesn't allow harm to happen. Come on, bring it on. And they all fell down, these big, hulking, great martial artists.

How do you function the more that you're empty, the more that you're not so attached? Oh, I'm so attached to the politics and to the struggle, to the peace work which I love and I've been doing for decades. But the more you attach to it, the more you suffer. T.S. Eliot says it this way: teach us to care and not to care. Relax. Make space. Become gracious like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu in that beautiful *Book of Joy*, with all the sufferings of Tibet and South Africa and so forth. How can they still laugh? Because they live in the reality of the present. They live in the heart of love. They live in the spaciousness of loving awareness. They become gracious.

And when you do, you become fearless. It doesn't mean fear doesn't arise, but something bigger happens. You sit in meditation and you face your tears and your worries and your anxiety and your trauma and your grief and all of that. And you face your longing and your love and all the beautiful things. And you take your one seat in the middle of it all and become the loving witness.

I work with a group of CEOs of some of the top twenty companies in the country, or the world. I don't know quite how it happened, but I've ended up with this as one of my assignments. And I like it because they're smart, mostly, and the ones who choose to come to me are ones with good values.

One CEO came to see me, and she was being attacked—it's hard for women as leaders, even more than men in our patriarchal culture—she was being attacked for her liberal policies and support and vision. We talked about how you could find this spacious equanimity in the midst of it all. Sweep through your body and return the sufferings to the earth so you don't carry them. I said, "You need backup, but you shouldn't carry it in your body."

She said, "What kind of backup do you mean?"

I said, "Here, I'm going to come back in a few days." And I brought her this beautiful statue of Durga, one of the Indian goddesses with eight arms filled with all these weapons. I said, "It's said that when you have trouble, you call on Durga. She'll come and take care of the demons, and then you're fine."

But along with Durga, I gave her a series of pictures: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King. And because she was also working in the tech world, Nikola Tesla and Einstein and Louis Pasteur. We made a kind of altar. And I said, "Now, when you sit, you turn to them and say, 'Okay, I know you've done it. You've all been attacked. There's Galileo—they wanted to throw him on the pyre. We can do this.' They're cheering for you."

And it changed everything.

The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. So what you bring to the game then is emptiness and love. You bring your presence.

When I was a monk, and before that living in Thailand, there had been some very violent student demonstrations in Bangkok. The military dictatorship was resisting, and the students were doing what students do and are supposed to do—they were protesting. It got quite violent for a long time. There was a standoff at the barricades, you know the whole archetype. And the country was in great dismay because things weren't moving, and the violence was escalating.

One morning, the abbot of a forest monastery gathered together a whole group of his monks and nuns. They got onto a big bus and drove into Bangkok. Out came sixty monks and nuns with their ochre forest robes, and they made a line. They stood between the military and the students in the street all day. They didn't move. And when someone asked why they were there, they said, "We're here to practice loving-kindness and peace."

And they stood there peacefully and lovingly for an entire day. And when they left, the space that was created was enough for the student leaders and the military leaders to begin a conversation to unwind that conflict.

You become gracious and fearless in a different way, and more flexible. It doesn't mean that you don't care, but you're not attached in the same way.

A poem from Hala Alyan, who is a great Palestinian poet: "I'm here to tell you that the tide will never stop coming in. I'm here to tell you whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful." That's a line—whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful.

And you become gracious and flexible. My friend who started Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, Father Greg Boyle—his work is mostly to love these people that have not been loved, the gang members who've lost so many friends to gun violence and prisons. He doesn't judge them. They say, "Father G, I need some money, I need bail, I need help." And he just gives it to them and loves them and supports them in ways they would never have felt before. He doesn't judge them. That's the moral arc.

So what can you do? You plant seeds. As Henry David Thoreau reminds us, "I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, but I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I'm prepared to expect wonders."

And those wonders come in part from your trust in the long-term moral arc. They come from the seeds of your best intention. You don't know when those seeds will sprout, but if you act from the place of beauty and trust and love—I think it was Immanuel Kant who talked about how there were moral acts of ethics and then there were moral acts of beauty. And those are the ones with the greatest power.

The Bhagavad Gita explains it as the secret. Here it is: the secret is to act beautifully without attachment to the fruits of the actions, because that's not given to you. You get to see the dance of life from the place of loving awareness and plant amazing seeds and let it unfold. Don't be so damn attached to it all, because that's not your job. Your job is to care and not to care. Plant seeds, vote your heart and your conscience, act without attachment to the fruits of the actions—because you don't know, it's the Chinese horse, who's supposed to be the leaders, what's supposed to happen.

From the Tao, it says, "When you don't realize the truth, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, who you are, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king, immersed in the wonder of the Tao. You can deal with whatever life brings you. You can serve whatever life asks of you. And even when death comes, you can smile."

If you want to read anything remarkable, read Father Greg Boyle's first book, *Tattoos on the Heart*.

So let's take a minute to be quiet, and then we'll do a little dialogue together.

A student speaks: "The questions you're raising—I don't think we can sustain ourselves through all the insanity unless we follow some of the paths that you outlined. I have so many friends, and we're all getting older. People are starting to have worse physical pain or sickness, but they don't slow down. They just

keep going as hard as they can. And I don't know what to say. I think the root of that is inside what you're saying—we do what we can. That's all there is."

"And this is what you're saying — we'll plant seeds. Maybe the grass, maybe it's about results, but I don't know if you have any advice about how to talk about that. I mean, I've had to deal with that for a long time, and I'm really working on it, but I don't know what to say to my friends. I mean, they're great people, they do great work, but they can't sustain it at that rate."

"Well, what I feel, China, because you spent your decades as an activist yourself — you've just really given yourself — I feel how much you care. And also, I feel that in these years, you've learned something like Gandhi taking a day a week in silence. You've learned somehow that you have to sustain yourself, and some of your friends haven't yet. So if the wisest woman you can imagine were to give you some advice, what would she say to you, China?"

"The thing I can think of is... I have a friend who used to say, when people couldn't spend time with their family because they were at work, she would say, 'You're not going to regret that you didn't work more when you die.' And it's like, I feel like we have to — I mean, I guess what she would say is, a lot of it is about who you are and not what you accomplish. And you just have to accept that."

"What I hear, and I really appreciate what you said, is that somehow you've now been cast in the role of the wise woman for your friends. And some of them are lost in a way. But the fact that you're talking with them and that you carry this voice is already a gift. Just like all your work to build a more moral and gracious community and society, you now have a new role. You have become that, you know, and it's a beautiful thing to see. So I thank you."

"Thanks so much, Jack. I appreciate that."

"Thank you. That's helpful."

"Jeff, would you come on and speak to Jack?"

"Jeff, how great."

"Hey, really good to see you."

"Glad to see you. Wonderful talk. So thanks for mentioning water. Got me going a little bit about fish appearing from water. I happen to live next to a creek — Alhambra Creek in Martinez. And it's a year-round source of water. I use it to water my yard. And the redwood trees love it, and everything loves a little water. The yard's doing fine — you can just see it over my shoulder a little bit.

That creek also, in these rainy years, has flooded and done severe damage to myself and my neighbors. And so should I curse the creek? You know? No. It doesn't work that way for me.

I first met you in a flood of emotions. The perfect woman had left me. She was looking for the perfect man, probably. Apparently she left her glasses at home because I was right there. That began the time that I've been listening and participating with you. I no longer — to the Chinese horse story — I am no longer made difficult. There's no difficulty that arises when the flood comes, because every year it rains, every year the flood comes. Maybe it's bad this time, maybe it's not so bad this time, but there's always water in the creek. So I just keep a calm attitude, and your advice to care and not care — I'm not sure exactly what that means, but it resonates with me, as practically everything I've ever heard you say has. So thank you very much for being my teacher."

"Jeff, you're a poet as well as many other things — a teamster poet and many other things. One of the things that you speak of, and I hear from you, is your relationship to the — you have a relationship. You and the creek are in relationship, and she floods and you befriended her in some way. And that's what I've learned about you — that you have a lot of water of tears, that your poetry and your"

work now is also to see with kindly eyes this world and to care with an open heart. So you and the creek are somehow relatives, and you're living together. You befriended each other. You know that she rises sometimes, so you can prepare a little bit. Anybody in a relationship knows this happens. So I want to celebrate the water of your tears and the water of your creek, and kind of reflect back the relationship that you have. Thank you for your words.

There's a comment in the chat from Carl. He writes, "I must have spoken to you before your talk and told you exactly what I needed to hear. Thank you for somehow knowing."

Oh, thank you, Carl. I appreciate that comment. Somehow we do get tuned with each other, and it's beautiful.

You know, folks, part of what happens when we come together in a field of care and openness—you know, emptiness and form, both the spaciousness of the heart that's big enough to hold it all and the care that comes out of it—then when we act, we become, even in difficult times or maybe especially, we can become what is sometimes called a "make-weight."

If you don't know that term, because it's not very common: when you have balance scales, and you go to some markets and places where there'll be that balance scale, on one side they put the papayas or the tomatoes or whatever, and on the other side they put these weights. The last in that line of weights are these very little weights, and they're the ones at the end that you put—one little make-weight at the end—and finally the scale tips.

In some way, I believe that we become the make-weights in this world, even when things are difficult, by our presence, our care, our connection to what matters, and also that spaciousness. We can place that weight, and the scales tip toward justice, toward beauty, toward love.

Maybe this is enough words for tonight. You all are quiet, and I'm deeply appreciative of that. We're quiet

together. And we're holding this world and this mystery of life in loving awareness and a big heart shared.

So thank you. As always, it's a pleasure.

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