# A Labor of Love

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:36:33

I'm glad to see you all here tonight. It's an odd relationship, you in your little squares and me in mine on the other side. But it's what we have, and it's a pleasure. I do miss meeting in person, I have to say. There's something so special about it. But I'm also glad we can gather virtually because it means people who don't live locally can be part of Monday night, and I appreciate that as well.

For those of you listening who are new—some of you have signed up as Spirit Rock Stewardship Circle members, while others are joining through YouTube or Facebook or whatever other channels exist. I don't even keep track of them all, but I know you're out there, and I welcome you.

Monday night has been for me a teaching time and a kind of personal ritual. I started teaching Monday nights forty years ago when I moved full time to Marin County from the East Coast, where we—Joseph and Sharon and other friends—started our center in Barre, Massachusetts. I did it pretty much every week for thirty or thirty-five years. Now I teach once a month, but I still feel deeply connected to the community.

Part of what Monday night is, is a reminder to all of us when we come together of what matters—in whatever way you can hear that in your own heart and in your own being. We take time to pause, to reflect, to listen to some Dharma teachings, to connect with one another. I really enjoy it, and tonight I look forward to the dialogues and questions and responses that we'll share.

For those listening in the broader audience, if you've never been on a retreat, coming to Spirit Rock is really magic. It's an amazing, beautiful valley that we acquired forty years ago from the Nature Conservancy to protect. We've preserved almost all of the 412 acres except for the bottom part of the valley where our retreat buildings stand. The rest is wonderful land to walk on, with beautiful tree groves and expansive views.

More than that, we so need time to go on retreat. There's something about a retreat that's different from just relaxing or taking quiet time at home. The discipline and the invitation and the community support really become magic. We used to joke about it after so many years of retreats—we called one feature of it "the Vipassana facelift." People would come on retreat after being really busy beforehand, struggling to get everything together, wondering if they even really wanted to go. They'd finally arrive, and you could see all the struggle in their bodies, the tension they'd carried for weeks and months, everything that had been going on. It's just obvious because we live in a culture and time that's so demanding.

And at the end of a week or ten days or longer, they'd be ready to leave—forget the Botox. Their faces were all smooth and clear. Their eyes were shining. We could sell this in Hollywood, I know we could.

There's something that's good for your spirit and your smile and your heart and your body and your mind. So here I am touting retreat, because it changes your life.

What we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We start with a meditation, which we'll do for about twenty-five to thirty minutes. Some of it is guided. Then we take a break for five minutes to stretch or relax. That's usually followed, as tonight, by some teachings, and then a period of dialogue, questions and responses. Whatever brings you here, you are welcome. As Emiko said, all the parts of you are welcome. This is a heart space that says, "Yes, you belong here." I feel your attention and your presence, and we share it.

So let's begin with some meditation practice. Let yourself find a way to sit that is stable and comfortable and also alert, in whatever way works for you, so there's a sense of presence and ease. Take your seat halfway between heaven and earth in this human incarnation. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently, or if that doesn't work, lower your gaze and bring your attention kindly just here where you are. We tend to focus so much on what we're doing and where we're going, on external things. Let that settle and come into the present moment, the reality of the present.

And to bring body, heart, mind all together. Bring your attention here to this embodied experience. Feel the presence of your life here, seated on earth. And take two or three long breaths to help everything settle.

Invite the presence of mindfulness, mindful loving awareness, to notice just this moment, just as it is. As you feel your body seated here, let the sense of ease and relaxation deepen. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. If you like, roll your head in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily.

Feel the weight of your whole body on the chair, the cushion, wherever you're seated. The weight of gravity pulling your body back to Mother Earth. And relax with it. Trust that the Earth supports you as you meet her. You take a relaxed and steady seat just here. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness, compassion.

Now with this embodied presence, pay attention to the life of this body you've been given. With loving awareness, feel how it breathes itself, wherever you sense it. The earth is breathing you. The atmosphere of air shared with the trees and all the living creatures. Feel how the earth breathes you, breath by breath. There's no right breath. Sometimes it's short or long or shallow or deep. Let it breathe itself. And you rest in a mindful, loving awareness that feels how the body breathes, inviting an ease with each breath.

Allow the mindful loving awareness of the body breathing to notice as well all that's carried in your body, very kindly. The areas of tension or contraction or stress. Notice the places of openness and ease. Notice the whole field of the body. It's alive with vibrations and tingling, warmth and cool, places of pleasure and of pain. The whole field of the body—you hold this mysterious, blessed field of energy with loving

awareness. This body, with its delights and its illnesses, its struggles, its play. You feel how it's always changing, tingling, vibrating, breathing, the life of the body.

And now, as if you could offer a bow, say to your body, thank you. Thank you for carrying so much, for carrying the beauty and the tears, the joys and the pain. So much you carry. Thank you. Holding it with loving awareness. Thank you. I'm okay just now. You can relax. Here in this present moment, I'm okay with it all. You can relax and rest with a spacious ease and gratitude, holding this whole bodily experience with kindness.

And with the same spirit of loving awareness, mindfulness, bring your attention to your heart, to the heart that holds so much. Yes, the physical heart, but the bigger heart that carries your longings and love, your tenderness and your pain, that holds hopes and worry. The heart has so many things it holds. Frustration and joy. Kindness. Impatience. All of it. Deep fears and even deeper love.

With mindful loving awareness, sense all that your heart has been carrying, surrounding it with kindness and compassion. All the tears and beauty and pain and love, all carried by this wondrous heart, this human heart.

And as you hold the fullness of this human heart with loving awareness, as if to offer a bow, you can say thank you. Thank you for carrying so much. Thank you for carrying the joys and the sorrows. Thank you. You can relax just now. I'm okay here in the present moment.

Let yourself rest in the reality of the present. Thank you, you can relax and be at ease. I'm okay, it's okay. We can hold it all.

Let the breath deepen. And experience the great heart of a Buddha in yourself—the great heart that holds it all with kindness and wisdom. We can do this.

And with the same mindful, loving attention, become aware of the mind, the thinking mind, the busy, ever-present stream of thoughts and images. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. They pour out. It thinks and spins and remembers and envisions. It rehearses and plans. It analyzes.

Feel the whole busyness of the mind, figuring things out, trying to take care of you, trying to keep you safe. Sometimes it feels energetically a little like the hamster in the wheel, going round and round, all to try to make it okay, to help you figure things out.

Hold it all. Surround it with kindness, compassion—it works so hard. Feel its energy. And notice when you bring kindness to all the energy of the mind, whether it likes it.

With loving awareness, as if to make a bow to the mind and all it does, you can say thank you. Thank you for working so hard to keep me safe, to take care of me in this life. I'm okay just now. You can relax. I'm okay just here and now. You can rest.

Let the mind settle down, held in the space of mindful loving kindness. You can relax and be at ease just here and now, in this moment.

And notice the space of stillness in the awareness beyond the thinking mind, beyond the words and images—the vast, silent, loving awareness that is who you are.

Shift your attention. You have noticed the experiences of the body. But who was noticing them? You have noticed the pain and the pleasure, the measure of joy and suffering carried in the heart. But who was noticing it? You notice the busyness of the mind, thoughts and images.

And relax back. Become the field of loving awareness itself, like space or sky. You are the awareness. You are consciousness itself, experiencing the body, the emotions, and thoughts. You are the loving witness, the timeless consciousness. Rest in it. Trust it. It is your home.

I invite you to take your seat and be comfortable and listen again, as usual, not to take notes. There's no quiz at the end. And in fact, not even to believe anything I say—even I don't believe everything I say, so why would you? Rather, listen and sense if there's something that resonates, something that's true for you, a reminder. If so, wonderful, and if not, just let it go. Listening in that way is its own kind of meditation, its own form of mindful presence, allowing. And then it has a bit of care or discernment in it.

For tonight, given that it's Labor Day, I had a long, well-crafted talk prepared, which I sometimes like to do. Those talks go on for an hour with all kinds of quotes and texts and so forth on right livelihood. I was on my way to the drug store to pick up a statin that my cardiologist said I should start to take because it will be good for me as I enter my eighties. Okay, you should probably take it. All right.

I was thinking about it, and I realized I didn't really like the talk. It felt too teacherly and too formal in some way. So I decided to simplify it a lot and try it a different way, which I will. Rather than talk about right livelihood and what the Buddha taught, I'd like to talk about the labor of love.

We spend so much of our time—in many cases more than half our life—working. This is Labor Day. And in the West, we define ourselves often by our work. You meet somebody and one of the first questions is, "What do you do?" "Well, I'm a financial analyst," or "I'm a nurse," or "I'm a gardener," or whatever it happens to be—a teacher.

In India, that's not what people ask. Instead of asking what you do, which helps them understand who you are, they ask, "Who do you worship? Who is your God?" Are you a follower of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles? Are you a Shaivite, where Shiva is the deity? Are you a follower of Ram, Ram and Sita, the path of love? And they know you by being a Vaishnavite who follows Vishnu, or someone who follows whatever the particular goddess or deity lights you up and inspires your life.

What a different way to see people. Who's your spiritual star? Who inspires you, instead of what kind of work do you do?

The beautiful thing is when you go into taxis. I think of those years I spent time in India, in Bombay with Nisargadatta, this wonderful guru I was with. Sometimes I rode the double-decker buses, which was great, but I'd take a taxi, and the taxis have a little shrine on the dashboard. Yes, there's the speedometer, which no one pays attention to. And there's the signals, which maybe or maybe not. But on top of that, there's Ganesh, or there's Sita and Ram, or there's Hanuman. And that's what matters more than anything.

I've told this story before, and I will tell some others—old stories that I love. When I lived in Bali over a number of different years for periods of time, my daughter, during one of those long stays of many months, was six years old. We were living with a Balinese family, and we found a school for dance. All the kids in Bali do dance, and her Balinese friends were training.

So she went to this school on Jalan Sugriva. Bali is so interesting because it's kind of a South Sea Island culture mixed with Hinduism, so you have all the gods and goddesses. And she started to learn Balinese dance. Of course, as a six-year-old, that was a class—it was fun.

By the time we were getting ready to leave months later, they were going to hold a kind of performance, her last performance, showing what she'd learned. So we went, and it was in the afternoon, and they started to get her ready for her dance performance. They wrapped her in silk and put all kinds of makeup on her, which she loved, then did her hair up and put these gold flowers in it. The teacher's wife took off some of her gold bracelets and put them on—for little girls who liked that kind of thing, it was like her best dream.

Meanwhile, it was starting to get dark. It was late afternoon and I had my video camera and I'm dad—I'm gonna film my daughter's Balinese dance. And I started to get impatient. After more than an hour of them dressing her to the nines, the teacher could see I was getting impatient. He looked at me kindly and said, "Relax. You'll get whatever film you get. But in Bali, we believe that everyone is an artist, whether they're five or six or eighty-five or eighty-six, and they don't perform for the audience. They perform for the gods. They make their dance an offering. And so your daughter is an artist, and we want her to look her very best in her offering to the gods."

If you travel in Bali—and it's a culture that I love—it's the most robust culture in spite of all the tourists. Everybody is an artist. The guy in the bank is also a gamelan music player, and the nurse or the doctor in the clinic is also a painter or part of a Balinese dance troupe, and the auto mechanic sings. Everybody is an artist. In fact, they don't think of art as something separate from life. You do it for the gods—or you meet someone and ask, "Who are you really?" "Well, I'm a follower of Hanuman, the servant of Ram who offers gratitude and support to everything good in this world." What a way to define yourself or to steer yourself in this life.

You know that story of the cathedral in France? A man was traveling through a town and went by an unfinished building in the stone yard. There were some people chipping away at stones and he began to talk to them. He said, "So what are you doing here?" One man said, "I'm a stonemason. I carve stones." The

man smiled and nodded and wandered around a little more. He saw another man and asked again, "So what are you doing here?" This one said, "Well, I carve stone, but I do it because it's a beautiful livelihood. I like doing it. And I get money to support my family and to live a good life in this town. It's a good livelihood." The man thought, "That's beautiful."

He wandered around more. Finally, he saw a third person chipping away at the stone. He said, "I see you're one of the stonemasons here." The guy's face lit up with a smile. "Yes," he said. "I am building a great cathedral. It may not be done in my grandchildren's lifetime. But what I'm doing with each strike of the hammer is to build a magnificent cathedral."

So how do we do the things that we do in this world? Yes, we need to feed our family or make money or get through the day. But what does it mean to live this life with a joyful spirit and warm heart? Think of the people you run into, whatever they're doing—whether they're the cashier in a market or the person you deal with for finances or the auto mechanic or the nurse. The ones who do it with a joyful spirit—what that's like.

Again, my daughter. She used to love going over the Golden Gate Bridge, first of all because once in a while we would get one of the toll takers who would smile and say, "Welcome to the city of St. Francis." That made us all light up. What a cool thing. But her favorite thing was to pay for the car behind us, back when you still paid before it all got automated. She'd say, "Daddy, let's pay for the car behind us." So, okay, we'd pay for the car behind us.

And then she said, OK, go slow and turn around and look. And the people would get up there and learn that their toll was paid by the car ahead. And then she would look back and smile and they would all laugh.

What a way to go through the world. Why not? What would it mean to keep your heart open as you go through the day? And what helps you? Because you're supported by the universe. The universe obviously approves of you because you're here, right? You are approved of. What helps you to keep that joyful spirit, playful, warmhearted? What reminds you, inspires you? Who reminds you?

When we did the guided meditation at the beginning of this Monday night class, perhaps you noticed that the instructions have changed somewhat. We went through the foundations of mindfulness—of body and feelings and mind and dharma—but in a different way from how I used to teach it. I would teach, okay, be mindful of the breath. Here's the practice of mindfulness of breathing with ease, breathing in and out and concentrating and focusing, all of which has great value, especially if you do it over some period of time and the mind becomes focused and steady.

But instead, I found how helpful it is for people to begin to be aware of their embodied experience, their emotional experience, the activities of their mind and say, thank you. It changes the valence. Instead of being kind of the mindful observer, there's this generosity that says, thank you for carrying this, for

breathing, for holding the emotions, for carrying the struggles in the body and the beautiful things. Thank you for trying to protect me, mind. And you can feel how it surrounds all of that with gratitude and loving kindness.

So you're able to be aware, but you're not trying to fix it or get different because the goal isn't to perfect yourself or perfect your mindfulness or perfect the world. The goal of anything is to perfect your love, our love. And so it's a little different valence, a different way of paying attention.

So what about when things are hard? How does the heart hold them? And I could go down the list—the political divisiveness and the politics and the elections. And politics, by the way, in case you've forgotten, is ritualized warfare. The Republicans and Democrats don't send their knights on horses with lances and they don't send their armies to D.C., except for maybe armies of lobbyists and online whatever. But it's really a kind of ritualized power struggle to see who's going to carry the responsibility and the role forward. But there's so much divisiveness in it.

And then we have the continuing wars—Sudan and Gaza and Venezuela and Ukraine, trench warfare in Europe. We thought that was over. Oh, my God. And climate change and racism and all of the struggles of humanity. And the economic divide—very rich on one side and large numbers of people who struggle financially on the other. It's why Labor Day became so important. It celebrated the life of working people and celebrated the right to unionize or to have an eight-hour work day or to not have child labor, those kinds of things. But it's hard in a modern capitalist industrial society. There's this huge economic divide.

So here we are—climate change and wars and economic struggle and so forth. How do you tend your heart in all this? How do you hold your heart? How do you keep a spiritual perspective, which is not a grim duty? Okay, I'm supposed to meditate, like I go to the gym and I work out and I have a good diet and I, you know, whatever, now I meditate. It's meant to be something more uplifting, like that thank you—that gratitude, that spirit of loving awareness that says, wow, here we are. How do I navigate this? How do I tend my heart?

What helps me is a sense of trust in the vastness of time. I don't see spiritual practice as a grim duty. I see it as an invitation to open and hold it all with the great heart of a Buddha. And I hear Dr. King saying the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. And I believe it. I believe there's a fundamental goodness, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it, in the human heart.

And I sense it and know it and trust it.

It's easy to get scared because the way politics works is that it tries to scare you. That's the currency of politics. Let's scare people, make you anxious, and then you'll vote for us. Those people are going to do something terrible. You better vote for us. It's all going to hell and we will rescue you. That's the game.

Having a vast sense of trust, it plays out. Praise and blame, gain and loss, birth and death, joy and sorrow, Republicans and Democrats and everybody in between. This is the game of being human. You can hold it

all with a sense of perspective. I can. And practice helps.

Having a meditation where you daily quiet yourself—where I quiet myself, quiet the mind and tend the heart—and have the perspective, as it says in the Bhagavad Gita, the secret. You remember the secret, right? The secret is to act beautifully, to act well, without attachment to the fruits of the actions. It's not given to you to determine, certainly in the short term, how it turns out. But it's given to me and you to plant beautiful seeds and water them. And that you can do in this life. If you have a seed, eventually it will bear fruit.

Practicing mindfulness, quieting the mind, tending the heart. What helps me is doing mettā. This year, I'm just doing mettā practice. I'm doing loving-kindness practice. And I love doing it. I love doing it when I drive because I can feel a little irritation come up when somebody cuts me off or somebody's impolite. I've been an aggressive driver—I was trained as a taxi driver in Boston. I know how to get my way through traffic. I've become kinder somewhat, but mostly I bless people when they piss me off. I go, "Oh, having a hard day. May you be safe and protected."

When I go through the grocery store, I look at the tired people working there or the people shopping late or early. Bless you. May you be safe and well, surrounded by love. I bless the trees and they bless me back. And it changes me to do mettā—to sit and do loving-kindness meditation, to share it.

I remember the teachers that inspired me. Ram Dass, who became more or less just love at the end of his life. He loved everything. One of my friends was there with him in his wheelchair after twenty years of living with his stroke and disability. He'd had a lot of illnesses and almost died. He was in a lot of pain often. This person walking with him said, "Ram Dass, are you in pain?" And he looked up and said, "I love my pain. I love everything. I love my pain." It was an amazing moment.

To bring it back: to love this life that we have, with all of it. That helps me to stay true in some way. Because everybody wants you to be something or do something—or if not, you internalize it from the society.

Remember the story of the little boy who went to the restaurant with his mom? The waitress came up to the table and said, "What would you like?" And he said, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." His mom looked at the waitress and said, "He'll have meatloaf and mashed potatoes, please." The waitress took all the other orders, wrote them down. And as she was about to leave the table, she looked at the little boy and said, "Do you want ketchup and mustard with your hot dog?" A big smile broke out on his face. And as she left, he turned to his mom and said, "She thinks I'm real."

How do we stay real to ourselves? And to each other. That's something too. Am I being true to myself, what everybody else expects aside? I ask myself this because there are all these requests and opportunities and problems and things to do. And I take some time to listen. What's my task? What's my love, really? What's your love?

I also get help from gratitude, keeping the heart open with all this. Sylvia Boorstein, another of our colleagues, another teacher—she and a friend became gratitude buddies. At the end of every day, they text each other two things they're grateful for, which means you have to scan your day and say, what am I going to text tonight that I'm grateful for? It's so helpful to have that spirit of gratitude, for myself and for others. If you want to learn more about it, go to Brother David Steindl-Rast's site—I think it's gratitude.org or something like that. He's really a wonderful teacher. Gratitude.

And then celebrate. Trudy and I went out on a date a couple of nights ago. We just took our time. We took a stroll along the water as the sun was setting, and then we went to our favorite French restaurant. I thought, God, it's so great—time in nature, walking along the bay, the waves, watching the moon, having a date. Please celebrate.

You remember that story of the priest? He was not quite accosted, but one of the young monks in the monastery was given the task of copying the prayer texts and the rules for the order because the old copies were wearing out. He was copying them dutifully, and then he got kind of upset one night. He had a dream. He said, what if someone made a mistake? We've been copying the copies and copying those copies for centuries. Is this really the great texts that our ancestors gave to us? So he went to the master there and said, I'm worried about these—we keep copying them, but they may not be really accurate. Could you go look? Because down in the bottom of the great monastery were the special rooms where the original texts were kept, wrapped up, sacred texts. Let's just check.

So the abbot went down, and he didn't come back up for a while. The young acolyte thought, what's the matter? He waited longer, and finally he went down the stairs toward the crypts where the great texts were kept, usually locked up, and he heard the abbot crying. He said, Master, why are you crying? And the abbot said, I read it. It said celebrate, not celibate.

Celebrate is what makes me happy too. And you—why not celebrate? I watch the Dalai Lama and Tutu and all these icons of joy, and I think of sharing mudita, which is one of the great Brahma Viharas, shared joy, paired joy. It's not an individual practice like metta is for oneself and others. Mudita is the joy in the happiness of others. It's one of my favorites.

You know that story of the farmer who had some of the most prized and best corn in all of Iowa? He'd go to the county fair and there would be all these exhibits, and they would be judging who had the best corn—the big kernels—and he had the most magnificent corn. But he also had the practice every year of giving away his best seed corn to all the farmers who lived around him. Somebody said to him, why would you do that? You know, with the old American competitive spirit—you've got the best corn. And he looked at them so kindly and said, because the wind blows. If my neighbors grow inferior corn in their fields, it will blow over and pollinate my fields too. The fact that I can share the best means we all get to share in the blessings of this really fine corn.

And I know it—when I'm able to share something that I love, music, care for something. It won't be the

corn because I'm not a farmer or a gardener. Maybe I farm other kinds of things. I farm loving-kindness in the heart—and on a good day, mind you.

Not always. But this is what it's like—it's our nature to want to share. Every little kid says, "Take a bite of this. Try this." You know how they want to stick stuff in your mouth when they're little? Because they're loving it.

There is a practice with mudita of picturing others and seeing them as a young child. I do this when I do my metta practice. If I go along and somebody seems grumpy or difficult, I gaze at them and look—what were they like when they were five years old? Still with a lot of innocence, getting ready to go to school, young and earnest. And I can see what that child was like. All of a sudden my heart just melts and I think, "Yeah, you too. Here we are. I know who's in there, even though you're being brusque or mean or whatever." Under there is that kid. Because it's still in all of us, that child of the spirit.

And then you envision what their happiest moments were. Even people with terrible childhoods had a happy moment where they rolled down a grassy hill or played in the sand or something like that.

My five-year-old grandson started kindergarten this past week. It's a big deal to go to school. You're a big kid now. Here's your little backpack, and you are becoming a school kid. I think he was some combination of anxious and scared—it's new. Would he have any friends there? It was a new school. Kind of, okay, stiff upper lip, I can do it. But you could see the tears.

I remember a couple of years before, when he was in preschool. He'd started a new preschool and had a hard time for a bit. Then I was visiting him, and he said to me, "Baba"—which is what he calls me. He said with this big smile, "I have two friends." And he gave me their names. "I have two friends." It was just so tender. *I have two friends.* We want that. We want that.

And this is what loving kindness and joy and mudita is. We talk about what keeps the heart open in these difficult and divisive times. It's our friendships, our love for one another, the vastness of space and time, the moral arc long but bending toward justice, gratitude, care for one another. What better can you do?

Happy Labor Day. This is the real labor. It is. It's the labor of love.

Arisaka, I'm so happy to see you here.

"So much wisdom tonight, Jack. So much wisdom of the elder. Thank you."

We're elders together, kiddo. It's come to this.

"I was especially touched by the notion of seeing the child in the other. For me, one of the things I did—I woke up one night very afraid, and I did Tsultrim Allione's Feeding Your Demons practice. One of the gifts you can receive from this persona, this archetype that you fear, came to me. The gift was about seeing the small, scared child even in the face of the person you fear. There's a political person I'm thinking

about—I'm not going to say their name—but that understanding that even in that person there's a small scared child who wanted to get their father's love and approval. It shifted something in me, because it made me realize every one of us came out—I was a midwife for twenty years—every one of us came out of the womb as a child just needing love. And all the horrendous things that some people evolve to do stem from how they were treated. To really see people not as enemies but to truly see that child and try to connect is so profound. I'm really glad you spoke to it. Because one of the decisions I've made as an elder is that as I prepare to leave, I don't want to leave angry at anybody. I want to leave with compassion for everybody. And seeing that child, knowing that child exists—it's so important. So thank you for that."

Oh, Arisaka, I just want to pause and drink in and honor and celebrate. You really, in these few words, offered us your heart—what really matters to your heart. When I hear it, there's such a sweetness. So thank you for dessert. It's the end of the evening, and if you're going to leave, leave with a really good dessert. Thank you, dear.

And Priscilla, I see a hand.

"Can you hear me?"

Yes, I can hear you just fine.

"Jack, you don't know me, but I feel like I know you. I've listened to you for years, and I feel very grateful for that. I also feel grateful because it was a beautiful evening—I could go to a gong bath and listen to the beauty of gongs and bathe in that, and then come and listen to your talk and bathe in this. Something I want to say is that the sound of your voice, and all our voices, sometimes gets lost because we're so much trying to figure out and listen to the content. When I listened to the gongs and listened to you, it was all so beautiful when it comes from the heart. All the voices that come from the heart are so soothing and comforting. Yes, what you say is so important, but just the sound of our voices when they come from the heart makes me teary. I just wanted to thank you over the years for your voice. It's a song to me at this point. And when I listen closely to so many people who show up authentically from the heart, it's all a song."

Priscilla, thank you. This is sweet. We get to share this, and it makes me happy too. I have a question for you. What helps you hear that song that you said is comforting and soothing, that sense of harmony, even when you're out in traffic and the horns are honking and the red light is flashing? As we go through our life, what helps you stay tuned to the harmony?

"Well, I'll tell you—I think because I've had a regular meditation practice for years—"

If I can drop into my heart, that's all I have to do. If I can get present, I just inhale and exhale, and it works. I just came off a week-long workshop on awe and happiness, and it touched on all the points you've been talking about. Because I'm also a writer, and when I listen to the bells, how I describe it when you really hear and get present—it's like chocolate cake in the womb. When you were talking about dessert with that

lovely woman, that's exactly what it is. When we come from the heart, we find that baby Buddha within all of us. You just have to remember. And sometimes in traffic, you forget.

*Chocolate cake in the womb. I will remember that too. Thank you, dear. This is wonderful.*

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Another voice spoke: So nice to see you, Jack. Actually, the woman before me said a lot of what I was thinking about. Over the years, your voice has been so musical to me, so soothing. I wrote down a couple things so I wouldn't forget—I forget everything after two minutes.

When you were talking about how people introduce themselves and ask what you do—I've been a writer and an artist all my life. Sometimes I would say, "I'm a writer," and sometimes, "I'm an artist," and people would respond, "Wow, that's so cool." It made me realize how lucky I was to be an artist and a writer. It taught me so much gratitude through their responses. I learned from all these people.

Gratitude is something I've studied a lot, in a twelve-step program and other places. Gratitude is just so important. And so I want to thank you, to give you so much gratitude, because you have helped me over the years. And you continue to.

*I'm listening and taking it in with much appreciation for your gratitude. But I also love that people say, "You're so lucky you're an artist." Somehow I dream that our culture would say, "Your life is your art. You are an artist." It's like Bali—you are an artist, you just don't know it. We are all a fountain of creativity, and it wants to come through us. When people light up seeing it in you, you're reminding them of something. It's a gift to them, but it also reminds them: I have that too.*

Exactly. Sometimes I would say to them, "You're an artist too, you just don't do it." They think that's kind of crazy, but I believe that. I believe that very deeply.

So it's easy for me to say, "Yes, you're an artist too. Go and draw something."

There was a little girl who was being driven to preschool by her mom. Her mom was an art professor at a university. As they're driving there, before she drops her off, the little girl asks, "So, Mommy, what do you do as an art professor?" Her mother said, "I teach people how to draw." And the little girl looked at her and said, "You mean they forget?"

Yes. Yes, exactly.

I had a similar experience when my son was pretty little. He was maybe five or six. I used to teach writing, so very often he would ask, "Where are you going?" And I'd say, "I'm going to teach writing." One day he just looked up at me and said, "Are these grownups?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Don't they know how to write?" He thought I was teaching them cursive or something like that. How perfect is that? "Don't they know how to write?"

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The next person to speak was Pamela. "Hi, Jack. I have a question. I had talked to you once before. I'm so honored and appreciative of your time. I'm a mom of twin boys and I've been divorced for many years. I guess my question is, how do you love this life when you are dealing with incredible grief?"

She continued, "I've been locked into this terrible struggle with the father of my sons for almost seventeen years. And now one of my twins has told me he doesn't want to live with me anymore—he only wants to live with his dad. I have been so full of grief and worry. How do I try to trust? How do I not hate and feel anger towards his father? I've spent so many years being a mother. I feel like I'm losing that ability and I feel terrified that I won't get my son back. I've spent the last two years fighting for his health. I don't know exactly what the question is. Is it how does one try to feel gratitude and joy? Or how do I trust that he'll come back to me?"

I listened to her, and first I wanted to bow to the honesty of what she was saying and the depth of the pain she was expressing as a mother—because that's some of the deepest pain we have as parents, taking care of our children, trusting them, hoping, not wanting anything to happen. It's built into a mother's DNA. And of course that brings fear and worry, and also a lot of attachment. You may have noticed.

I asked, "He's seventeen, you said? How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

And he has a lot of medical issues that I've been managing. He doesn't want to deal with them or have me manage them anymore.

You know what? You have done beautifully. I hear it. You've tended him. You've cared for him. You've handled the medical needs. You've protected him from things, maybe from his father. Magnificent. It's exactly what a mother is supposed to do.

And now it's like the fledglings in the nest—he has to try to fly. When I hear you, I sense that he may even unconsciously realize that the only way he can learn to fly is to separate from you, because you've done everything for him. Something in him... it's like young men at some point who say, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?" They want to. He wants to do something to make his life that's not entwined with his mother.

You needed to protect him and be that close to him to protect him. And now he's saying, "Okay, you've done it, Mom. Now I've got to try it." And then there's that part of you that says, "Oh, who will I be if I'm not taking care of him?"

Let's pause for a moment because I'm saying some things and I'm wondering how they're landing.

It's complex because he tried to take his life two years ago. He's finally doing better now. And the way his

dad takes care of him is different than the way I do.

Of course. So you're afraid he won't be taken care of, and he might take his life. And he's saying to you... I feel this because it's primal. It's in your core chakra, in your womb: "I have to keep him alive." And he's saying, "Mom, I've got to do it myself now."

All these parts of you that don't trust, that say he might die—all those are true. But you can't grow up if you don't face some danger. You don't become an independent person with your mom still there.

I think—thank you—I think where the double grief happens is that I've started to feel like it's because I'm a bad person. I'm not enough.

You're a bad mom. Didn't do enough. Okay. Close your eyes, and first check in: where do you feel the grief in your body?

Like here, in my chest.

And what's it feel like?

Like I'm locked up.

Feel the place that's locked up, the grief. Is it hot? Is it raging? Is it ice cold? What does it feel like, locked up? What's in there?

Like a volcano.

Okay, there's a volcano. So first, just feel the locked up place and the volcano with interest and care. You kind of need to do this because your son probably has some of it in himself too. So you have to learn how to do this. Feel it and wrap it with awareness, to say, "Okay, I feel this volcano happening"—of rage and pain and who knows what else is in there.

And now you're not running away from it. You're doing something very brave. You're actually bringing a respectful attention to it. And it has to be respectful, because this part of you is trying to protect you and your son.

First, you can simply say: Thank you. Thank you for holding all this, for trying to protect me. And see what happens when you do this. How does it respond?

It softens.

So feel that softening. If you were to let it come out, how big would it be? Would it be like a huge volcano, or would it be bigger? Get an image for it. Is it like a tornado? A hurricane? A nuclear explosion? What is it? How big?

Big. Enormous. Nuclear.

Yes. So feel that. And you can make space in your image, in your heart. See what it's like, right now, to just let all that energy have some space to explode—in grief and tears and rage and pain. You're actually making space with loving awareness, saying: This is what a mother's heart has been carrying.

What happens as you just allow it to be, let it open? What do you notice?

I feel gratitude to you. I feel a lot of gratitude.

And in yourself? Is it still there? It should be, probably.

Yeah, but it's less.

Now feel something else, and see if this is right. Underneath all the pain and volcanic rage and anger and fear and confusion and worry—you know why it's all there? Because you care. Because you care so much. You care for your son. You care for life. Feel that place of care that gives birth to all this: I won't let it happen. I have to protect him.

Feel the care underneath it all. How deeply you care. Do you? Is it true?

Yeah.

And that's what I would call a good mother. You could say you've been bad, but I see the care, and it's enormous.

Thank you.

So my recommendation to you is to make a ritual for yourself, and have it witnessed by someone you love. Do you have a good therapist?

Yeah.

Good—witnessed by your therapist, by close friends. Write a letter to your son saying: I set you free to find what you need. Your mother has done everything to care for you. I trust you. I love you. And I set you free. Because he needs that. He needs to find himself. He has to face his own dangers, or he'll never grow up.

Put it on the water, or light a candle and burn it. Have people witness it. Make a ritual that becomes an offering of love. Because this is one of the great things parents learn over the years: you love immensely. And then you have to set them free. Because they're not yours.

He's not yours. He's himself.

So make a ritual for yourself. And invite close people, make it beautiful, because this is a huge thing and you're ready for it. And he's saying, "Mom, I'm ready. I need this." And I think you're wise enough and brave enough to do it. How are you feeling?

"I really appreciate how you reframed what he needed, because I think I was interpreting it as his rejection of me, because I was bad, instead of seeing that it was him needing to break free. Really helpful."

Yes, I'm so grateful. Well, all right. Stay with this. Write down what we talked about. Make the ritual.

It's so interesting—I'm a twin. My twin brother broke away before I did. He just needed to get out. As soon as he could, he left. I still stay more connected. But he had to get away. And I missed him terribly. But he knew he had to do it. He just had to do it.

So, all right. Thank you, dear.

"Thank you so much, Jack."

Thank you.

So I want to pause here and offer gratitude to each person who spoke—to Priscilla and Susan and Pamela. We're all in this together. To Arisika, thank you, dear heart friend.

We have our sufferings, but we're also held in something greater. I read this beautiful song prayer from an Aboriginal elder in Australia. He said, "When you sleep, the star is working for you. When you sleep, the rocks are working for you. The whole world is working for you, even when you sleep." You're being held by something. We all are, by this earth. Our tears are held and our joy, the beauty and the aliveness of being human. Part of the aliveness is that we suffer too. And it's not a mistake. There have to be the opposites of day and night, joy and sorrow, beginnings and endings, birth and death.

We live in a world of ever-changing polarities, and everybody has gain and loss. Everybody gets praise and blame. Everybody has pleasure and pain. And who we are is that loving heart that can hold it all and navigate it and bless ourselves and the people we touch.

It's a pretty good gig, I think. Not easy. But anyway, I'm so glad to share with you.

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