Essential Teachings for Changing Times

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:37:47

Thank you, Emiko. And thank you, everybody who's joining. It's good to see your faces as I scroll through the squares. Many dear friends, perhaps a few new folks, all good.

Here we are. Big changes afoot. And what would be useful to do and to talk about? I was trying to think about that for tonight, because I'm aware that there have already been dozens of brilliant analyses of what happened in the election from different points of view, from the triumphant to the tear-jerking and catastrophic. I'm sure some of you have read all of that. And then there's been all the advice-giving: if you're grieving or if you're dancing in triumph, here's how you take care of yourself in times of change. You meditate, you go out in nature, you take tea with other people, you make community, you make music and art, you read poetry.

A lot of what politics has done—and it's not new, actually, it's part of the political playbook—is to encourage our fear. That's how it works. Trying to make you afraid so you'll vote for somebody or other. And behind it are trauma cycles. People feeling nervous and upset in times of change. Some disenfranchised, some concerned and compassionate, some really afraid in other ways, because it does fuel fear. And you'll have your grief and your triumph and you'll be fed all of this. Then we have all our emotions that come with it—our anxiety and the stories and the thoughts.

But it's hard to see clearly when we're frightened or angry. In some way, what this time also calls for is to be able to take a step back, center, see anew with the heart, the eyes of understanding, and a kind of wisdom. That's the direction I'd like us to go tonight.

What's also true is that mindful loving awareness—and we'll do a sitting in just a couple of minutes—mindful loving awareness is big enough to hold all of this. Praise and blame, gain and loss, triumph and defeat. It's big enough to hold the fact that it's Veterans Day, when we celebrate in some strange way, and now it could get almost tearful, the succession of battles and wars, one after another. We've had a lot of them because the United States is also warlike in its history. Many, many wars. This is what human beings are doing regularly on the planet.

And today, there were 200,000 people who died. Let that in. People holding them and grieving in tears, young and old. And there were 250,000 new people who came in today and were born. It's wild.

Here we are, with all these different swings—whether it's politics or emotions, the possibilities of how we live together, the difficulties that we make for one another. In the Dharma, the teachings of wisdom invite us to take a breath, to release the body of fear, and to recognize that the world is not a problem to solve

but a living organism, a living being to which we belong. We are part of the rhythms of all of life. We are the consciousness that has come at this time.

As in the Tao, where everything has its season, mindful loving awareness says: take your seat with an open heart and a bigger perspective. Step out of the tyranny of time—what just happened, what happened before that, what will happen, which we don't know but we have some imagination about—and step into the timeless reality of love and presence and a vast vision.

I should mention that Trudy told me I wasn't being compassionate enough when I told her what I was going to talk about. That could be true, and if so, I apologize. I'll do my best. One has to listen to one's spouse, at least somewhat.

So let yourself settle and take this seat halfway between heaven and earth, in this human incarnation you were given, with its praises and blames and joys and sorrows, with gain and loss and success and failure, with sweet and sour and beginning and end and hot and cold. This is the world of the play of opposites.

Allow, if you will, your eyes to close gently. Feel your body centered on the seat. You can sink down into the seat, into the earth, in a steady way. You belong here. The world is a living being to which you belong. Once you settle down, feel a stable and centered presence. Take a couple of long breaths.

Here we take our seat in the midst of all things.

The one seed at the center of the universe that is our seed.

Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Perhaps again, circle your head a little bit to release your neck. Let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax and the hands and arms rest easily. Relax your weight into the seat and feel how you're completely met and supported, steady on this earth.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with compassion. And let yourself rest in a quiet and open loving awareness.

This mindful loving awareness can feel your body breathe. The earth is breathing you. You are part of this breathing earth. Relax into it. Trust it.

Let the same loving attention expand to the whole of your body. All the pleasures and pains, all the experiences of inhabiting a human form, held in loving kindness and loving awareness. This mysterious human body and human incarnation held in loving kindness and loving awareness doesn't need to be fixed or changed. All of it held in kindness, just as it is.

Allow the loving kindness and awareness to also notice all the feelings and emotions of the heart. The longing and love and grief and fear. The excitement and tenderness. So many feelings—the worry, the anger, the compassion. Holding it all with loving kindness. Nothing to fix. Nothing to change. Simply the beautiful loving presence.

There are tears. There's laughter and joy. There's excitement and worry. And a hundred other feelings rise and fall like waves in the ocean. And you are the loving kindness, the loving awareness that holds it all.

With the same loving kindness, you can notice the energy of the mind—the stream of thoughts and plans, ideas and worries and imaginings, analysis, understandings, stories, images. A river of thoughts and feelings, a river of images and words. You can hold it all with loving kindness and say thank you. Thank you for trying to figure it out and take care of me, plan the future, make it all good. Thank you for all that work. I'm okay just now. You can relax. And let the mind begin to quiet, held in loving kindness.

You are not the sensations of the body. You are not the waves of feelings and emotions that rise for a time and transform and fall away to another. You are not the thoughts or images of the mind. You are consciousness itself. Mindful loving awareness. A consciousness that knows all of these experiences. Vast. Timeless. Spacious. Mindful, loving awareness. A space of knowing, witnessing.

Loving awareness can hold it all with tenderness and wonder—the whole town, the seasons as they turn, elections that come and go, whole nations and civilizations that arise for a time and pass. You are the witness, consciousness itself, loving awareness. You see the mystery of rising and passing and hold it all with love, for that's what it is.

And when you open your eyes, you get to play your role, your dance in the drama. But you know that who you are is so much bigger, beyond all this. You are consciousness itself. Rest in it.
Remember—consciousness and love.

So this evening, I want to speak to the basics of the teachings offered in the Buddhist tradition, but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. It seems in times of change and disruption, we can get engaged in all the complexity of it, and we can have all our emotions and thoughts and worries activated. But there's something more fundamental that I believe and know deeply can guide us through complicated times.

And these basics, first, want us to tend to our own heart and mind—to find a way to quiet your mind, to tend your heart, keep it steady and loving. And the amazing thing is that this is possible.

After becoming president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela asked some of his bodyguards to go with him for a walk in town. Then they went for lunch at a local restaurant and sat at a central table. The waiter brought their menus. At that moment, Mandela realized that at a table right in front of theirs, there was a single man waiting to be served.

When the man was served, Mandela told one of his bodyguards, "Go ask that man to join us." So the bodyguard went and transmitted the invitation. The man stood up, took his plate, and sat down next to Mandela. While eating, his hands were constantly shaking, and he didn't lift his head from the food. When they finished, he waved without even looking directly into Mandela's eyes. Mandela shook his hand, and

the man walked away.

One of his guards said, "Madiba, that man must be very sick. His hands wouldn't stop shaking while he was eating."

"Not at all," Mandela replied. "The reason for his tremor is another." They looked at him quizzically, and he said, "That man was the guardian of the jail where I was locked up. Often after the torture I was subjected to, I screamed or cried for water. And he came to humiliate me. He laughed at me, and instead of giving me water, he urinated on my head. He wasn't sick. He was scared and shaking, perhaps fearing that I, now the president of the country, would send him to jail and do the same things he did to me—torturing and humiliating him. But that's not me. That behavior is not part of my character, nor of my ethics. Minds that seek revenge destroy states and humans, while those that seek reconciliation build nations and well-being."

So when we're invited to tend to our own hearts and mind, Nelson Mandela really reminds us that this is our birthright, that this is possible for us.

In addition to tending our own hearts, then, like a bodhisattva, we have to open and listen to the cries, the fears, and the dreams of the others around us. And there's a lot of fear now. These are from people who feel not respected or not included, people worried that they will not be, worried about what will happen to them.

I remember seeing a beautiful Tibetan thangka of the sage Milarepa.

And he was sitting there clad in his white cotton, with one hand cupping his ear in a gesture of the Bodhisattva who listens to the cries of the world—so that after we quiet the mind and tend our heart, we listen in a deep and compassionate way, because there are cries on all sides.

It helped me not just to speak of politics, but to remember art, poetry, other ways of seeing. William Carlos Williams said, "You can't get the news from poetry, but men and women die every day from lack of what is found there." Something deeper.

Here's a poem for you when we speak of respect:

Remember how astonished your daughter is at ladybugs and motorcycles, a pebble she finds, a moth, a firefly, the stars that follow the moon, mayflies, light seen from the window before bed. Remember beneath each scarf, bandana, and surgical mask, there is a throat that might break into sudden surprising aria. Remember the image of your lover's brown hair on the pillow in the blue hour of the morning, any morning, is worth more than all your poems and thoughts. Remember even an angry word from them is worth more than the best line of poetry you've ever read. Remember your poems cannot shelter you or make a roof for the ones you love. Remember the earth's sole vocation is to astonish.

Remember. The earth's sole vocation is to astonish.

We've been through so many things. Ups and downs, amazing and beautiful and magnificent and terrible and painful, connected and divisive. This is part of our birth here on earth—to quiet the mind and tend your own heart, to hear the cries and the fears, and to see with the eyes of wisdom the reality, the laws of incarnation, to live wisely. These are what I offer as core teachings.

I know if I were to go to Ajahn Chah right now, if he were still alive, and say, "There are many people who are really distraught about what has happened in this election"—not everyone, some of you may be celebrating, and I honor that too—he would look back and say, "Anicca. Things change." And smile as if to say, can you honor that? Change happens. It's the law. Anicca. And then he might tilt his head and say, "Oh, and dukkha too," the second of the characteristics—suffering, uncertainty. He'd nod. This is dukkha too. Can you see it? It's how it is. Is your heart big enough to hold it?

Now, if I were to ask the Dalai Lama, he would probably look with watery eyes of compassion and say, "This is hard to hold. I know it is." Hand on his heart. "Me too," he would say. And then he would laugh and say, "We learned to do this, you know."

Anicca, the wisdom of uncertainty. Things change. Nations change, societies change, politics change. We change, we age, we get sick, we die. The Buddha said, did you think this would not happen to you, to the people you care about? All these things come and go, and right now we are at a big turning point on the earth—what Joanna Macy calls the great turning. Can we shift from an exploitative consumer consciousness on this planet to one of interdependence and mutual care? Because for wellbeing, we may need to do this. We do need to do this.

And then you might say, well, that's a big order. I don't know if human beings can do it. I don't know it either. But it's not about an election one way or the other. They come and go. There are such huge other forces happening right now.

Climate change. Artificial intelligence. Enormous changes coming. Nuclear fusion energy that could proliferate and offer complete free energy everywhere if it's done right. Huge possibilities and huge problems.

And as T.S. Eliot says, "In my end is my beginning." Everything that turns then offers a new openness and beginning for something else. There is a freedom when we accept that things change. They do change. We can take our seat and step outside of that small sense of time, the tyranny of our ideas, and feel the great movement of life.

I like this poem:

When you return, fallen leaves will climb back into trees. Shards of the shattered vase will rise and reassemble on the table. Plastic raincoats will refold into their flat envelopes. The egg, ball, and its transparent halo slide back into the thin calcium shell. Curses will pour back into mouths. Letters unwrite themselves, words siphoned up into the pen. My gray hair will darken and become the feathers of a black

swan. Bullets will snap back into their chambers, the powder tamped tight in brass casings. Borders will disappear from maps. Rust revert to oxygen and time. The fire returned to the log, the log to the tree, the white food curled up in the unsplit seed. Bird song will fly into the larks' young lungs. Answers become questions again. When you return, sweaters will unravel and wool grow on the sheep. Rock will go home to mountain, gold to vein, wine crust into grapes, oil pressed into the olives, silk reeled into the spider's body, ink drained from the indigo tattoo, diamonds will be returned to coal, coal to ferns, rain to clouds, light to stars sucked back and back into one timeless point, the way it was before the world was born, that fresh, that whole, nothing broken, nothing torn apart.

So we take a seat in the freedom outside of time, open to the change, the dance of it all.

And of course there is also dukkha—the three marks. We know the obvious dukkha: continuing warfare and injustice and racism and suffering, aging, pain, death, loss. They are our companions. We live in a culture that rather prefers to hide from this. There was a page—so young, and so many pills—on the cover of the second section of the Wall Street Journal describing the tens of millions of antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and ADHD medications that our children take. This is how our society deals with stress. Or we hide, blame somebody else.

Dukkha is part of life. Did you not notice? And when we open to it, something happens. We realize it's not personal. As Longfellow wrote, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." It's us.

Impermanence, suffering, and dukkha. And what comes out of it, if we turn toward it, if we acknowledge that this is the way it is, is such tenderness and compassion.

Zen Master Issa's three poetic lines: *Dew evaporates and all this world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, so fleeting.*

Now listen one more time. Because these three lines were written on the death of his young daughter. And you'll hear what he really meant:

Dew evaporates and all this world is dew. So dear, so refreshing, and so fleeting.

This is what opens the heart—that we share this. We share dukkha and anicca.

Yes, I could speak of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. But these are the basic laws as well: impermanence, instability of things, endless change.

And our freedom comes when we understand that dukkha is not a mistake. You didn't make a mistake. Somebody didn't make a mistake, and therefore we have suffering in human life. I mean, we have much more than suffering—there is beauty and magnificent love and so forth. And there's dukkha. It's simply the reality of our life as well.

Now, sometimes these three marks, as they're called—anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unstable, unsatisfactory, can't be held, suffering; and the third one, anatta, or selflessness, the emptiness of it all—sometimes they're named differently. Thich Nhat Hanh replaces dukkha with nirvana. He wanted people to understand that not only is there the field of suffering when we are attached and identified, but there's an unshakable freedom, an unshattered freedom.

Here he writes:

This body is not me. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born. I have never died. Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars, manifestations of the wondrous true mind consciousness itself. Since before time I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us love now, and then let us say goodbye, only to meet again soon. We meet each other in all the forms of life. This body is not me. I am life without boundaries.

These are profound, wild, and liberating teachings.

You live in illusion in the appearance of things, in the color of the chain. There is a reality, but you do not know this. And when you understand, you will see that you are nothing. From being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

This is the invitation to step beyond the small sense of self, the individual that we have to take care of and carry and pay our taxes and stop on the red lights, and so forth. But the sense of separation is also a fiction. We are interwoven in the breath of the earth and that truth—billions of organisms that live within our own body. Most of you is not you, you know. It's all the other microorganisms in your gut, in your eyes, in your fingernails, every other part of your body.

And we know that we're not separate. You know it especially when you're on the mountaintop looking down from some amazing hike, or listening to a piece of music that transports you beyond that small sense of self. You know it when you make love or take psychedelics or have some profound meditation or dance until you disappear. We all know it.

A beautiful passage from an Australian Aboriginal elder puts it this way:

I'll tell you about the story, the real story, where you feel. Listen carefully to this. You can hear me. I'm telling you because Earth, just like mother and father or brother. You, that tree, same thing. Your body, my body, I suppose I'm same as you, anyone. Tree, working when you're sleeping and dreaming. That star, he's working there. See? He's working.

I can see. Always at night, if you lie down and look carefully, you can see that star working. When you sleep, blood pumping through your body—watch closely. It goes pink, then white. You see it work? It works. In the night when you dream, lying there, that star is working for you. Trees and grass are working

for you.

Wow. What an understanding. It's all working for you. It's all a part of you. There are a billion causes and conditions that allow you to exist today.

We don't need to talk about politics or nations. It is so extraordinary that existence is here at all. And you and I get to play our part in this great dance. We get to plant seeds. In the Bhagavad Gita, there is Arjuna who doesn't want to go out on the field of battle, and who finally realizes the great lesson: to do your best to plant seeds, to act well without attachment to the fruits of your actions. Because you don't get to decide the outcome. You get to reach out and touch and mend what you can with your hand.

I looked at our past election as a ritual. Politics is a little bit like ritual warfare. Only instead of the Democrats and Republicans and the Libertarians and the Greens all mounting their tanks or their cannons or their steeds with swords and going to Washington to see who gets to win and take over for a while, it's ritualized. But it's sort of the same thing. And I think it's astonishing that hundreds of millions of people could participate in it. Even though it is troubling and troublesome and has its really messy parts and is smelly in some ways, it kind of worked. It was this huge ritual that we did, and we didn't destroy each other yet in any way. Kind of extraordinary.

So you now get to take the role that was assigned to you by your karma, or central casting, or however you want to say it. You got put in a pretty weird role—you know that, right? And then you get to do something with it. This is the freedom. The freedom is that, like Arjuna, here you are and it's messy. You don't want to go on the field of battle. But it is your task, wherever you are. And then you bring your heart. You say, all right, then let me choose to do something beautiful.

Howard Zinn wrote: "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. But if we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act."

Oh wise ones that you are, remember there's a freedom just where you are to choose—in the midst of change inevitable and all the causes and conditions, you get to choose. You get to choose your spirit no matter what. What greater gift could there be?

Now remember that it's also helpful to acknowledge in changing times that there is refuge to be found—traditionally, refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Just take a pause for a minute. The Buddhist texts begin: Oh nobly born, remember who we really are. Remember the dignity and freedom that was born in you. Yes, we humans can and do get lost in separateness and tribalism and conflict, in the body of fear. But we can also see beings with unconditional love, and from a place of freedom—as Nelson Mandela did in that restaurant.

We can do this too.

The human race tends to remember the abuses to which it has been subjected rather than the endearments. What's left of kisses? Wounds, however, leave scars. That's Bertolt Brecht. We forget the kisses sometimes and remember the trauma and the wound, but there is so much more.

Refuge in the Buddha means to see beings with unconditional love, to understand somehow that we can turn toward this life as a bodhisattva—as a being who deliberately turns toward suffering and difficulty and says, "Oh, I've been called. Let me help alleviate suffering. Let me help beings be free." Even if the sun should arise in the west, the bodhisattva has only one way. When there is something difficult, their heart opens, their eyes open, and they say, "Ah, this is the place for me to add something beautiful."

I can hear Krishna Das, my friend, chanting this song that was given to him or that he wrote from a Zen prayer from Roshi Bernie last month. I wish I could sing it to you in his style—I'd need a harmonium and a better voice. "Calling out to hungry hearts everywhere through endless time. You who wander, you who thirst, I offer you this bodhi mind. Calling out to hungry spirits everywhere through endless time. Calling out to hungry hearts, all the lost and the left behind. Gather round and share this meal. Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine. Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine."

And here is the freedom that you find. The freedom to step out of fear. Yes, dukkha—that's part of the game, as Nietzsche understood. But there is also freedom from fear. You turn toward the difficult and say, "Oh yes, the perfect place to care, to build compassion, to transform." You rely on your own true nature, the Buddha nature, the nobility of beings. You rely on the Dharma, the truth, the laws, the way things are.

Human suffering grows when there is more greed, more hatred, and more ignorance. We can see plenty of it in human society—individually, in our families, our communities, our societies. But there is an opposite. Instead of greed, we can cultivate generosity. Instead of hatred, we can cultivate love. Instead of ignorance, we can cultivate wisdom. There is suffering and its causes. The more greed and hate, the more we suffer. The more love and wisdom and clarity, the more freedom and well-being we find.

Helen Keller put it this way: although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. And this gives birth to compassion.

When we see with the eyes of the Dharma, we see the possibility of living in a different way. One of the Buddhist texts recites: "Others will be cruel; we shall not be cruel. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will steal and take what is not given; we shall be generous. Thus we shall incline the heart. Others will speak falsely and maliciously; we will tell the truth with kindness. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be envious; we will be appreciative. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be arrogant; we will have humility. Thus we will incline the heart. Others will be unmindful and uncaring; we will be mindful and caring. Thus we will incline the heart. Others around will lack wisdom; we shall cultivate and live with wisdom and blessings. And thus we will incline the heart."

This is a recitation of the noble truths, the path of the Dharma. Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. And it is lawful. We can plant seeds of goodness, and eventually they will bear fruit.

Maybe not in our lifetime, but they will. And this is our freedom—to know what's true. Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law. And this is the Dharma. You know this.

So we're being called to remember the deep and basic truths in the midst of all that's going on. And that is our freedom. Others may do certain things. We know who we are in heart and mind.

O nobly born, remember refuge in Buddha nature and fundamental dignity, liberation of heart. O nobly born, remember the Dharma, the possibility of awakening just where we are. Remember Sangha, community.

The monastic Buddhist communities are among the oldest living continuous communities of humans organized in that way. And it's an expression of our collective wisdom. You know it and I know it—when I've worked in nonprofits and corporations, an individual's understanding is always limited. And it's so helpful and wonderful to come together with other people and say, "How do you see it? Let me understand how it looks from your perspective. What do you have to offer?" And almost always, almost always, the result is better. We need one another in so many ways. And we care for one another. If there's an accident near you, someone falls in the street, the initial impulse is: How do I help? How can I make a difference? This is who we are. Community is born into us—or we're born into community is probably a better way to say it. You come out of your mother's womb and you're already in community. And you look around. Don't forget it in these times. Sangha, community, mutual care—so uplifting and so liberating.

When I graduated from nursing school at age forty, the only job I could get was at a Veterans Affairs hospital. The work was challenging in every possible way. It didn't help that the veterans teased me relentlessly, asking over and over if I was married. I'm a lesbian. My growing discomfort with the question seemed only to egg them on. Meanwhile, caring for them required a great deal of physical intimacy. While changing a dressing or washing a severely ill patient, I often could tell it had been a long time since they had been touched with kindness. Gradually, I came to love the crusty old vets and the stubborn guys in detox, many of whom were homeless. Their spirit and resilience in the face of tremendous adversity were a kind of miracle.

Later, I worked on the psychiatric ward where patients could become argumentative, angry, aggressive. I sometimes didn't feel safe there, especially after it occurred to me that all these troubled veterans were combat trained. Once, a large psychotic man approached me in a truly threatening manner. Just as I was starting to get worried, an equally large Vietnam vet with dementia quietly came between us. Several other vets seemed to appear out of nowhere, and they stood nearby in silence. I felt safe. I'm retired now, but I still volunteer on that ward twice a week. I feel like I'm visiting my family.

This is us. This is us, you know?

Chan Master Cheng Yen says, "Those who do not have faith in others will not be able to stand on their own. Those who are suspicious will always be lonely." What does it mean to have faith in others, to trust, to feel the Sangha? This is the freedom of the heart of community. The heart knows that you're supported by millions and billions and gazillions of beings—from the earthworms and the hummingbirds, the field mice and the trillion microorganisms growing in your intestines and around your body. And the

countless numbers of good deeds being done every day by billions of human beings for one another, to help each other. So many ways—caring for family, for community. That's the web that we don't see in the newspapers, in the media.

But there's something even greater, if you will, or as great, when you look for your freedom, freedom of heart. And that is to understand that you have backup. Your backup is Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Archbishop Tutu and Wangari Maathai and Thomas Jefferson on his good days and Marie Curie and all the sages and saints of thousands of years. They're your backup. They're part of you. And the trees, as that beautiful aboriginal vision says—they're working for you. And the creatures, working for you.

This is the great freedom: that you're not alone. You're supported and loved and part of this, no matter what. And yes, there's impermanence and there's dukkha. Just how it is—incarnation, birth and death, gain and loss, praise and blame, joy and sorrow. We all have this. And there's something bigger. Who we really are. The mystery of consciousness itself, born into this body and incarnation. And the invitation is to the great heart of compassion and understanding. You are free. And you're free to do beautiful things with your life.

After a period of silence, a woman named Susie spoke from the gathering, her voice carrying both tenderness and weight.

"I bring my family," she said. "Here is my daughter, my daughter who has cried since the election. My daughter who I always say is the Buddha—she's the wise daughter, filled with wisdom, and she cannot..." Susie paused. "And I say to her, it's just life. It's just what is. And I hold her in my heart and make jokes with her. But I say, go ahead and cry all you need to. And this is somebody who is a wise mind. She lives from a wise mind."

Susie continued, "I just volunteered for the ACLU as soon as I heard the results. I always donate, but I figured I'll give my time. Make phone calls. But I don't know what to say."

"Can you say what your daughter's first name is?" I asked.

"Sarah."

"So first of all, thank you for bringing her and you in together. Because there are people that are weeping."

She's younger, you know, and sensitive. She's not like my mom who said, "Oh, Jackie" – she called me that when I was little – she said, "My father came back from World War I, and then we lived through the Great Depression and World War II and the Cold War, and you hiding under your desk from the nuclear bombs, and the assassinations." She said, "We've been through this." But she hasn't. And even if she had, she may still be carrying the tears of many, many people.

And so your willingness to hold her is exactly right – to honor her sensitivity along with her wisdom. It's kind of a beautiful pair: wisdom and a sensitive heart. I want to thank her for her tears. We need more tears, actually. We need people who are our leaders to also be able to cry sometimes, because that's what's true. And she's not holding that back. Good for her.

You're lucky to have each other. Thank you, Susie. Take care, dear.

Ben, great to be here with you.

"I feel excited to be able to speak with you. I've been sitting with your teachings for a while now. This year I had a good dose of dukkha, some pains that cut pretty deep, and I turned pretty hard back into meditation. I've been studying a lot and sitting a lot, read a bunch of your books – or at least listened to them on audio. So I've spent many hours with your voice in my ear. I did a short retreat in September, and I'm doing one at the end of this week at Spirit Rock for seven days, which I'm very excited about. Your talks and teachings are always extremely helpful.

One of the places in my own practice where I'm struggling is that I get locked into some justified anger. Your talk today was so much about these broad perspectives and being with others in a profoundly compassionate way. But I find I can get stuck on these small loops where I'm frustrated with pain that others have caused me or caused people close to me. I think in *A Path with Heart* you talk about your 'top ten playlist' – this is my top ten playlist. I'm becoming quite familiar with it. I'm curious if you have suggestions on practices I might bring into my daily practice, as well as the retreat that's coming up."

First, I really appreciate that you have been practicing. You said you got a big dose of dukkha. Can you say in a word or a few what that was?

"It's all a tad tender, but yes – some big personal losses, and an awakening to some sufferings that were going on around me amongst people I'm close to. Big transitions. I also run several companies, and it's a lot of work and very exhausting. Until this year, I hadn't been doing the work I needed with the meditation on a daily basis to really bring the equanimity I needed. So several things piled together."

Thank you for sharing that.

Because people are listening and I haven't realized—okay, you're in the middle of it. And there's all these things that go on. And if you're in a bit of a leadership position too, or whatever you have, then you have

even more of it. People looking in, you have to carry some wisdom and compassion in the middle of it. And then people are behaving badly around people. They do that. They cause pain.

So where do you carry that justified anger and the pain from it? Where do you carry it in your body? If you close your eyes and sense that anger, where is it?

"I feel a fair amount in my throat and in my chest."

Yeah, so feel it. What's it feel like? Is it hot? Vibrating?

"Yeah, it is. It's also mixed with nervousness in the moment here."

Sure. So let yourself feel that—the nervousness and heat in the throat. The throat often carries things that would come out: the shouts, the pain, whatever, all that. And then notice, as you feel it, because you make space with mindful awareness, what happens if you don't try to get rid of it or do something about it, but you just feel it and hold it with a kind attention? Say, "Ah yes, this is pain. This is painful." And this is anger that comes up, and the mind justifies the stories. You watch the mind do its stories, and you feel the pain or the anger or the heat of it. And you just bring a compassion to say, "Yeah, this is part of what we have to live with." What happens when you do it? Does it get more intense?

"Yeah, so I practice a lot and this comes up a fair amount. I think we're at... I go to planning and I go to arguing with people in my head. And I replay scenarios. I replay injuries and I replay what I would say or what I should have said, or how I can protect myself in the future, protect people around me in the future."

Okay, close your eyes again. Here's what happened. You felt the pain—it's hot. You felt the anger. And then quite accurately, you'll notice that your mind does all this stuff to not just feel that, feel the pain of it. You want to fix it, argue, make it better, something.

How about if you just let yourself hold the pain? Because it hurts and it's unfair, and so you feel that tearing because of the injustice of it. You feel the heat of anger and the unfairness, the pain underneath, and how much you care. Tune in, because all this suffering is also because you care so much. Right? And you're not trying to fix it. And you can see your mind arguing—thank you, okay, I've done that, thank you. And you're just being kind and saying, "This is part of what my life is—to also be able to hold this with compassion."

And notice what happens with your eyes closed. What happens to it? Does it get bigger? What does it do when you hold it this way?

"Yeah, it calms down a lot. It relaxes."

Yeah.

"I think there's a lot of feelings behind it, which is something you mentioned in a heart with neuropathy."

Yeah, yeah. And they could be there too. So it relaxes and calms.

You can feel that other emotions want to come. Now you become—and it's beautiful to watch you—more in your body and more present. You're not trying to fix it or bargain it away or argue it or something. You're just being with it in a compassionate and steady way. And through this, it will begin to teach you how to be present for the other emotions. You more and more trust that you can do this. And then you will be less reactive. It's not going to scare you or overtake you or feel like so much. Then you can take whatever actions you need to take, but they won't come from anger or fear—they'll come because you care.

"In these last eight months, I've been really practicing, and my capacity to be with feelings has increased tremendously. But this is one of those places where I'm really knotted up. I think what I'm really taking away is to be very attentive and aware of when I go from the feeling to the planning or the rational or the judging."

Right. And don't judge it—that's what the mind does. But that's not the place to live. The place to live is in a compassionate heart that holds the feelings.

This is beautiful, because as you were doing this work yourself, you were teaching everybody else. We are all grateful to you.

"I heard and appreciated very much your comments this evening for myself and for my heart in general, but I come to you tonight as a mother, as a parent—the mother of a permanently head-injured child. He lives because his accident happened when he was beyond our ability to keep him on our insurance. He is, in essence, a ward of the state of New York, living on Social Security, disability, and Medicaid. The incoming regime has promised to slash and destroy and take away benefits. I fear for my son's life. I don't know how to hold that sadness. I don't want to fix it. But I don't know how to hold the pain of seeing someone take and destroy so many people's lives. I realize that's in the future and we need to be present, yet I see this person promising to do these things. I'm trying to hold that in my heart and keep my heart open. What would you suggest?"

First of all, what you're saying is also a concern of many folks. There may be people who hold another view, who feel good things will come out of this next administration. People have all these different perspectives. But when I think about your son, it's so tender and so real as a mother. And then I think about the people I know who are immigrants here but undocumented, and I realize someone could knock on their door, haul them out, push them across the border to a place where they never even lived. There are a lot of very frightened people because of the kinds of things that have been said.

So you're not just giving your mother's voice for your son. You're also giving the voice of the mothers—because there are so many people who could be at risk. We don't know.

I don't have a simple response. I kind of just want to sit with what you've said for a moment.

As a father and a parent, holding the suffering of our children is one of the most difficult things we're ever given to do. It just is. It's almost like you want to say, "I'll take on the suffering myself and you'll be free," but you can't. And so you're bearing it, and you have to. So first, just to acknowledge—this is so hard.

Now, second, let yourself, let your heart and your consciousness expand to sense all the other mothers whose children are at risk—not just from the current politics, but maybe it's the children of mothers who are in Gaza. And Sudan. And all of a sudden, let yourself feel as if you could hold hands with these mothers, because you are the mothers that are holding the world together. And you're holding it with torn hearts. You're really holding this. And you need to support each other, which you do.

Feel this. This is one of the most difficult things you'll be asked to do in your life. And one of the most important. Can I carry this in love and care and not be taken over by despair and hopelessness, but still somehow do what I can? And it's you, and it's all the mothers that carry this together. The mothers have been doing this for a long time. Mothers are extraordinary. And it's really hard, which is why we need each other. You need each other in community.

Hold hands. Feel the sense of support. And love. And a kind of courage. I see you have a lot of strength. I see you have a lot of courage. And I see you have a really profound love. Don't let the outer things take over your heart, because it's such a good heart. You are strong. I see it. Strong and loving.

I'm glad to connect. We've been friends for a very long time. So I hold you in the same way, with that kindness and a lot of respect. A lot of respect.

And when I look now and I see the screen, the eyes and the faces are so beautiful. And same respect. We carry a lot. You know, you're asked to carry a lot—personally, sometimes really difficult. And then with your eyes and your heart open, we carry a lot collectively.

Take a look across the screen at the faces, if you will. You can sort of scroll a little, because these people are with you. Look in their eyes as if to ask, can we do this together? Can we hold this world together in a beautiful way, in the face of difficulty, personal and collective?

And feel the courage behind these eyes. We can do this. Feel the compassion behind these eyes, because it's here.

It really is.

I'm grateful. Thank you. Linda, thank you. And thank you to everybody who's tuned in.

We are holding hands. We're touching hearts. And there's this great love that grows in the midst of it all, that blooms even in the suffering.

This is also true.

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