Monday Night Dharma Talk: Stories as Medicine

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:12:37

So, you online people and campers here, I just got back to California not that many days ago. Trudy and I went to India and we went to Dharamsala for a Mind and Life Institute meeting with the Dalai Lama and a number of lamas and contemplatives and a bunch of scientists focusing on AI.

The Dalai Lama was not really teaching much now at ninety, but he did blessings, and I got to have a little conversation with him, which was wonderful. Somebody asked him, "Do you think AI can feel compassion?" And he reflected and said, "Can it feel pain?" You know, he's got this great kind of mind to turn things around. The technologist building it said, "I don't think so." And then the Dalai Lama said, "Well, if it can't feel pain, it won't feel compassion."

That's a really interesting thing—that actually, in order to have compassion, we have to be able to feel. We are in relationship. This is like two different kinds of minds, the silicon mind and the human mind. How many of you spend a fair amount of time engaged with your computers, your phone, television, electronic media? For most of us, it's a big chunk of our time. So our lives are woven together. Part of the question at the conference was: how do we have a wise relationship to it in ourselves? And then also, how do we steer it so that it actually is beneficial for humanity?

After Dharamsala, we went to Varanasi, which is perhaps the oldest existing city in the world, on the banks of the Ganges. We stayed right on the river, and there are the ghats, the docks. There's the bathing ghat where people come down to bathe in the holy Ganges. There's the laundry ghat where sheets that people have been washing are laid out on all the steps. There's the cow ghat where the cows are tied up. And there's the burning ghat, which is amazing, because especially when you go at night, it feels like you're entering Dante's lower realms. There are always fires burning and bodies there.

About every twenty minutes, through the day and through the night, people will be carrying a bamboo stretcher with a body wrapped in silk, chanting, "Ram Nam Satya He"—the only truth is the truth of God. Then they deliver it, put it on a pyre with wood. So there are always bodies burning there. They carry them through the streets.

You might think it's gruesome or weird. But there you are, and you notice, if you pay attention, that there are beggars in Varanasi, especially along the river in the old ancient part of the city. Tied in the corner of their shawl are enough coins to pay for the wood, for the fire, for their cremation. You might look at them with a lot of pity—oh, what a struggle your life is, there you are a beggar. And they look back at you and

they go, "You don't get it. I'm in Varanasi." Varanasi is the portal to the realm of liberation, to the awakened, liberated space of life and heart. Anyone who's cremated in Varanasi is saved in the deepest way. They look and say, "You think I'm in trouble? How about you, baby?"

It just melds your mind in these different directions, which is really good because we're all in it together, basically.

So anyway, we had this trip to India and other places. And then I came back and this book came out. It's a lot of my favorite stories, some long, some short. I'm basically a storyteller. I love telling stories. Some of them you'll have heard—they're repeats. I don't mind repeating a story. It's like kids saying, "Read that one again," right? These are not the kind of stories where you say, "Oh, read the next one." You can do that, but you can also read that one again.

For me, stories are a medicine. That's really what's in this book—stories for healing, stories of medicine, stories of awakening, stories of community. We need them. Some have a little humor, or are poignant.

There's the story of a little boy who goes out with his parents. He's seven years old, and they go to a restaurant to have dinner. The waitress comes to take their order and says, "What will you have, little boy?" He says, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." His mother says, "He'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and milk." The waitress goes around and takes the rest of the orders. As she's leaving the table, she turns back to that little boy and says, "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?"

And this big grin spreads across his face and he says, "She thinks I'm real."

There's something both poignant and humorous in that story.

I was teaching up here at some point with a Tibetan Lama, and I was cracking jokes or whatever. And he said, "I get it. You get them to laugh, and then when their mouths are open, you can pop the pill of wisdom in." I thought, well, that's a kind of nice interpretation of it. But there's something else in it too.

Ram Dass talked about how his life was transformed when he met his guru. He tells the same story over and over again. He went there thinking, "Oh my God, another Indian guru." And he meets the guru, and the guru starts messing with him. "That's a really nice car, the Land Rover you drove up here. That'd be great for the guru. Would you maybe think about giving that?" And Ram Dass says, "Oh my God, what a huckster, this guy."

They sit and they talk a little bit, and they get quiet. Then the guru says, "Come close." And he says—being translated from Hindi into English—"Last night under the stars, your mother. You were thinking about her." Ram Dass says, "Well, that's not such a magic thing. You think about your mother." And the guru said, "Big belly, right?" Ram Dass goes, "Hmm." And then his guru says in English, which he doesn't speak, "Spleen."

Spleen, and Ram Dass's mind just kind of breaks open. He said, "Wait a second. Did the CIA come and tell

him about my life? How could he know that I was thinking about my mother who died this year of cancer, of the spleen?"

And so when his guru was training him and looked at him—there's a phrase in India called the glance of mercy, where your guru or this person looks at you, and as Ram Dass said, they can see into your soul. And they love you anyway. Like, how could that be? Really, they see how weird you are in every part, and they can say you're completely worthy of love. And it changes you. It kind of changes your DNA.

So that's one of his favorite stories. And what it does is it invites us to imagine what it would be like to be seen in that way, or maybe to see ourselves in that way.

Somebody gave me recently—I was in Hawaii actually, and I met up with these old friends and they said, "Do you remember? More than fifty years ago..." And I had this book. Some of you may know the book of Frog and Toad. Those are great children's stories. But this is a book of George and Martha, who are hippopotami, by James Marshall. I don't even know if it's still in print. I love these images. Five stories about two great friends.

Here's story number one. It's not going to take that long to read.

Martha was very fond of making split pea soup. Sometimes she made it all day long—pots and pots of split pea soup. Here she is in her skirt or apron in the kitchen. If there was one thing that George was not fond of, it was split pea soup. He's frowning. George hated split pea soup. You can hear a kid smiling, of course. "Ew, I hate..." He hated it more than anything else in the world. This is the way a child thinks, right? But it was so hard to tell Martha.

One day after George had eaten ten bowls of Martha's soup, he said to himself, "I just can't stand another bowl. Not even another spoonful." So while Martha was in the kitchen, George carefully poured the rest of his soup into his loafers under the table. "Now she will think I have eaten it."

But Martha was watching from the kitchen.

So there's this picture of his shoes getting filled with split pea soup. Last page.

"How do you expect to walk home with your loafers full of split pea soup?" she asked George.

"Oh dear," said George. "You saw me."

"And why didn't you tell me that you hate my split pea soup?"

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings," said George.

"That's silly," said Martha. "Friends should always tell each other the truth. As a matter of fact, I don't like split pea soup very much myself. I just like to make it. From now on, you'll never have to eat that awful soup again."

"What a relief," George sighed.

"Would you like some chocolate chip cookies instead?" asked Martha.

"Oh, that would be lovely," said George.

"Then you shall have them." And she placed a plate of chocolate chip cookies on the table.

It's just four pages—very, very short. But stories tell us things. And yes, it's for little kids, but it speaks to the way we hide things from one another. What does it mean to actually connect with each other in a more genuine way, in a kind way?

What I hoped from this book is that these are stories that touch the heart—that you read and think, "Oh yes."

Let me share another story. Many of you have heard it before.

This is the story of a middle school teacher in her first year of teaching. She says, "In my classroom I had one particularly difficult young woman." This was eighth grade. "She would interrupt the class, she would stand up and walk around, she would make rude comments, she would disrupt everything we were doing. And I tried every intervention that a teacher knows. I made contracts with her, I praised her, I gave her special rewards she could work toward. I threatened consequences. I went into the teacher's lounge and the other teachers looked at me and said, 'Oh, you have Shay in your class. We're so sorry. Maybe you should transfer her out.' But I was a new teacher. I decided I was going to keep the students they gave me and work with them."

And so it continued through much of the year like that—not easy.

The last day came and the class was dismissed. She said, "I watched Shay walk out the door and thought, 'Well, that was a failure.'" Then about fifteen minutes later, as she was gathering her things at the end of the school year, in walked Shay. She had called the girl's home. No one answered. She had tried to talk to her family. She wasn't sure Shay even had family that paid attention to her.

And what was she doing back? The teacher thought, "One more last act of terrorism in my classroom."

Shay marched right up to her and thrust into her hand a little bowl—the kind students make in ceramics class. On the bottom it had her name inscribed: Shay. She looked at her teacher, handed her the bowl, and said, "Thank you for trying to like me." Then she turned around and walked out.

"I have never left that bowl out of my classroom. Then I became a school principal and a superintendent, and Shay's bowl is right there on my desk."

This is the work we have to do. These are the kind of stories in this book that remind us of what it means to meet each other with deep respect.

There's a wonderful long story many of you know—of Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady, this great ancient tale told in different places.

Chaucer told a version of it. And the essence of this story is the question that was posed to Sir Gawain by the hag that he meets in the deep dark forest to help him find his way out: What do women want? He can't figure it out, so he says, "All right, give me a year." He goes around with this big old book and asks everybody, comes back, and still doesn't have the right answer. And then there's a very magical kind of ending to it.

Part of that story, which leads the first section, along with that story of the little seven-year-old boy and the waitress, is a section on seeing each other with respect. What does that mean? Even the Dalai Lama has used the phrase "my friend the enemy"—that he's unwilling to put them out of his heart even though they're functioning in their role as an enemy.

So I'm reading you some stories, ones I like.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a small bird, a titmouse, asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story."

And this story is really for all of you who have some sense of despair in these times. Wade Davis, the great explorer, says despair is a failure of imagination—that we can imagine something bigger than the troubles we're in.

"In that case, I'll tell you a marvelous story," the titmouse says. "I sat on the branch of a fir tree close to the trunk when it began to snow. Not heavily, not in a giant blizzard, no. Just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the titmouse flew away. And the dove, since Noah's time an authority about change in the world, thought about the story for a moment and finally said, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in this world."

It's a really beautiful reminder. We don't know what will break the branch off, what will tip the direction that we go, but we have the opportunity to reach out and mend something in the fabric of life. And if you don't do it, if you stay in contraction or fear or despair or overwhelm, it actually leaves you stuck in a sorrowful place. It's action that somehow undoes anxiety. It's making even the tiniest difference to others that begins to change the direction of your life, your circumstances, and the circumstances of the world around you.

There are stories of my teacher Ajahn Chah. In the morning we would go out with our alms bowls just at dawn and walk for five miles or however long it was, barefoot, to the nearby villages. The villagers would wait and offer food into the bowls. Mostly it was the older women who would wait. They were the ones

who got up early and cooked, and they'd put food in the monks' bowls. They sort of adopted us. We were kind of like their pets or something. They loved us. They would come to the temple while we'd be trying to meditate and get enlightened and stuff. On every week—new moon, quarter moon, whatever—there'd be an all-night sit and we'd be meditating. And these women, they would sit down. They were the great yogis, actually. We thought we were cool. They were much better. They sort of said, "Okay, we'll feed you. We'll take care of you." It was very sweet.

So we were crossing the little dike in the rice paddies, and there was this giant boulder across the field. Ajahn Chah said to the monks who were with him in this little group, "Monks, is that boulder heavy?" And, being Ivy League educated, "Yes it is," right? He smiled and said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

There was so much wisdom in that tiny little interaction about how we deal with this world. Yes, you can see it, but do you pick it up?

You have a choice.

There's a long story in here about Vimalakirti, who is a great Mahayana bodhisattva. It's really a story of dueling spiritual teachers. I'm sure you would never imagine that great bodhisattvas and spiritual teachers would have conflict—unless, well, in my industry, the swamis and lamas and mamas and whatever they are, they have their differences. And sometimes it's not even very pretty.

But anyway, it's a story of how they work this out. And of course it turns everything on its head, because the protagonist—the Buddha—sends his disciples to help Vimalakirti, who is pretending to be sick. And so all these great bodhisattvas go to take care of this lay person who's supposed to be much lower on the spiritual totem pole. And of course, he one-ups all of them. It's sort of great because it asks: what are your ideas about how you should be as a spiritual person? These are accounts that are modern as well as ancient, because they're part of our human character—how we work with each other, how we judge.

There's also a long story in here of the Buddha's last year of his life. It tells about all the different things he encountered in his last year at age eighty, which happens to be my age. What was difficult and what was important and what his last teachings were—reminders, people coming. And then how he died, and how that affected people.

The story begins, and the text actually, with a phrase that's pretty much like "once upon a time." Because these big stories—Vimalakirti, or Sir Gawain, or the big story of the Buddha's last year—are really mythological stories, which is to say they're archetypal or universal. And as you read them, you find yourself somewhere in that story. Are you that person coming, beseeching the Buddha, "Give me the last teachings because I didn't quite get it. This is my last chance. Come on, help me"? Or are you the person who gives him his last meal, but it turns out he gets sick from that meal? And then that person feels really bad, thinking, "I'm the person who gave the Buddha dysentery. What kind of bad karma is that?"

And then the Buddha calls him and says, "You don't understand. The first meal and the last meal are like

the holiest meals that you can offer. It doesn't matter what happened to my body—it was ready anyway. You are blessed because your intention was so pure." And what matters is really the intention of the heart. And so you read and you get these kinds of reminders.

There are stories of conflict resolution, because—in case you have noticed or not noticed—we are in times of conflict. Political conflict, the poly-crisis: climate, AI, political divisiveness, continuing warfare, continuing racism. What do we do with this?

So this story: In the early years of the Iraq war, an article in *The New Yorker* described how a small unit of American soldiers were assigned to go to the holy city of Najaf, one of the sacred cities of Iraq. This was a delicate mission, as the presence of Americans in uniform was seen as a desecration of this sacred place. When they approached one of the most revered mosques, hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side, fists waving, shouting, throats taut. They pressed in on the fifteen Americans. The reporter witnessing it said he felt afraid. The Americans glanced at one another in terror, afraid that a shot would come from somewhere, that someone would open fire and it would turn into a massacre.

Quite suddenly, in the middle of it all, the American officer in charge stopped, held his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground, and stood there against the backdrop of a seething crowd that was almost a thousand people deep now, shouting. It was a striking gesture, the reporter wrote—almost biblical. And then he took a knee.

The officer, his eyes hidden behind his mirrored sunglasses, held his position and instructed his men to follow. The soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy, and then one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the boiling crowd, pointed their guns at the ground in the same position as their officer. And the crowd fell silent. Their anger subsided, and the officer ordered his men to withdraw.

Dan Baum, the writer of the story, said it took him months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes, the officer in this account. When he found him, he asked Colonel Hughes who had taught him to calm a crowd by pointing his rifle down and kneeling in a war zone in a distant country. The colonel replied that while they would typically fire warning shots in such a situation, the problem with doing so is that the next thing that happens is people start shooting for real. He went on to say the Iraqis felt that the presence of these armed American soldiers was disrespectful to their mosque, to their religion, to the culture of this holy city—and that the obvious solution was a gesture of respect.

What do we need?

In our lives, in the conflicts we face, in the conflicts of the world—to be able to meet one another with that kind of respect changes everything.

I like to talk about this often because one of the key teachings is that more than anything, intention has great power in your life. Intention is the root of karma. What does that mean? Well, suppose there's a

person who backs out of his driveway, hits the gas, and crashes through the fence of the house next door into the living room. Now suppose that person did that because he was really upset—his next-door neighbor had cut down all the big beautiful trees on their joint property line, and he was, how do you say it, a little bit pissed off by that. If that happened, the police would come with their blue lights and haul him away.

On the other hand, suppose when he backed out of his driveway the accelerator pedal stuck, and he couldn't help it, and it crashed through the fence into that person's house. People would come out and say, "Are you okay? Is everything all right?" It wouldn't be the police—it might be an ambulance if you were hurt. The exact same act: crashing through the fence into the house. What made the difference? The intention.

So intention is incredibly important in how we resolve our conflicts, how we deal with one another. And one of the most significant tools you have in conflict with other people—should that happen in your life, or if you're in a little argument with the people you love a lot but who aren't behaving the way you wish they would... It would never happen to me as a teacher, of course, but just in case—I'm married to a Dharma teacher, and we would never have an argument. Anyway, if you take a breath in the middle of it, a mindful pause, just half a minute, and you ask yourself, "What's my best intention?" There you are. And you realize, well, my best intention is actually to work this out, to love this person, to figure out our way.

If you ask, "What's my heart's best intention?" almost immediately it changes your tone of voice, your eyes soften, and instead of working to be right—because of course I am right, right?—you shift. But it's not about being right. Would you rather be right, or would you rather be happy? Checking in with your intention is one way we commune, one way we find love. In a moment, your demeanor changes and that person feels it. And all of a sudden, with that kind of respect and care, you're in a different movie—a much more benevolent one.

So, there's another story in here. I'm just telling stories. Is that okay? Do you mind? I mean, that's what we're doing tonight, right? And then we'll take some time for dialogue.

I led a men's retreat here some years ago with good friends—Robert Hall, Tisha Bell, Wes Nisker. We led a series of them. In the evening, after we'd sat together for the day, we'd have a kind of council. We'd sit in a circle, and then Robert or one of the others would raise a question for the men. "Let's talk about money. What's your relationship to money?" And all these men who never talked about that, really, unless it was their business—they would open up. Or, "Let's talk about sex." And it would come out. Or, "Let's talk about the things that really are there in our lives." The men would come together, maybe forming a smaller circle, and six or eight men would come and talk about what they were struggling with. All the other men would be nodding—yeah, me too.

Anyway, one of the themes was also talking about what's our relationship to the men who are much less well-off than ourselves, which is true for all of us. Those of us who are in this room primarily have a

somewhat privileged life on this planet. So there was a man in that circle who said, "Well, I have this job." He talked about it, then said, "But on Sundays in LA, I'm a DJ and I have a blues show that I do. I love the blues." He said, "One day I got a letter from a man"—we'll call him Joseph Brown—"and it was one of those kinds of letters. I get them."

You can see in the upper corner where it came from—the correctional institution. And Mr. Joseph Brown wrote and said, "I'm incarcerated here, and I listen to your show." Apparently this fellow said, "I have a big following in the prisons." And Joseph Brown said, "I want to ask you a favor. Would you play some of the early blues greats? Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, some of the original Delta Blues—Mississippi John Hurt, and so forth. I sure would appreciate it."

So the next week, as a DJ, he read the letter out loud and he said, "I'm going to play a few of these great old blues masters." He played Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and so forth. A couple of weeks later, a letter came to him. "Dear Joseph," it said, "thank you for playing that music. It really touched me. This is the first time I can remember hearing my name said with respect." Because he said, "This is a man who obviously knows the blues when he announced it. This is someone who's really tuned in to the origins of the blues. I thank him for asking. Somebody finally offered me some respect."

And then we just all looked at each other as men and said, can we do that for one another?

These are stories in here. It's really also mysterious. I mean, here we are Monday night. We had twenty, twenty-five years in the trailers on the land. How many of you were here when we had the trailers? Yeah, a quarter, half of you or something like that. We had bigger crowds than we could have had here, but because of COVID and flu and such, I just wanted to keep it a little less packed in. And we had amazing teachers—Thich Nhat Hanh came, the Dalai Lama came, Tibetan lamas and mamas and swamis and great various teachers. All that was fabulous.

Anyway, one night it happened to be a full moon night that also happened to be Halloween. I'm not making this up. People came a little bit in costume, and we had candy at the door. We'd arranged for the Ganden Shartse monks to come and visit. They were touring. There are a couple of groups—one, the Gyuto Tantra Choir, and the Shartse monks have a tantra choir. They're some of the monks that do the multi-vocal chanting with all the overtones, quite extraordinary. So they were going to come and sing for us before our meditation. This is cool, it's Halloween, it's great.

And then they said, "Halloween, what's this?" And we said, "Well, costumes." They said, "Oh, we can do that too." And they opened their van. They said, "We've got a lot of costumes. Let's do the skeleton dance!" And they pulled out their skeleton costumes and went out in the meadow there under the moonlight, chanting and dancing. And I'm going like, what kind of reality is this that appears in West Marin? How does this happen?

But it's so mysterious. For us, we think we're in charge.

My dear friend Sharon Salzberg—she was seventeen or eighteen years old, a freshman at University of Buffalo. Brilliant, but also with a tremendous amount of trauma. And then she got this little fellowship or something to go to India. She was interested. And the Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to give a public lecture. She raised her hand and she said, "I'm about to go to India for the first time. Which teachers should I visit? Who should I go see?"

And Trungpa, who had many sides to him, shall we say, good and otherwise, but he was quite eloquent—he looked back at her and he said, "Madam, best to follow the pretense of accident."

I thought it was profound and witty. And true. How does this happen? We didn't have Spirit Rock. We looked at places in the Russian River and places down near Santa Cruz—things that were too small, that were too large, that were far too expensive. Some of them were too far away. We wanted it to be closer to the city.

And we gave up after two or three years of looking.

Then a friend from Zen Center called and said, "You know, there's this piece of land in San Geronimo Valley near this little village of Woodacre. It's owned by Nature Conservancy, but they want to sell it to buy rainforest land in South America. They don't need it anymore. Do you know where Woodacre is?"

And I said, "Well, actually, my wife and I have been living in San Anselmo, but we just decided to buy a house in Woodacre. We know it very well. We've been shopping for a home here."

In fact, we had our realtor, and they said, "Well, this place..." We didn't want to build a place, but they said, "Okay, you have to go look." And we came, and of course, it's gorgeous. Alright, it's a lot of work to build a place.

Then this wonderful philanthropist from the East Coast who was also a dharma teacher wrote a note and said, "I hear you're trying to buy some land and build a center. Here's a little check for you—one million dollars." I thought, "Gee, I could go to Tahiti and live a long time with this check." But in fact, the land was $950,000, which all went to buy 50,000 acres of rainforest. And we ended up with Spirit Rock. Why? How? We had no idea.

The same was true for our center in Massachusetts, Insight Meditation Society. We had rented some Boy Scout camps and done retreats in 1975, and we did our first three-month retreat in a Catholic monastery on the coast of Maine, in Bucksport. Actually, it was next to a big logging operation, so people would be sitting and they'd hear the logs being unloaded. Anyway, we held a three-month retreat, and when we finished—there had been a Catholic nun who came—everybody said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have our own place?"

So we started to look. There was a team of a few very devoted students who looked at places. Some of them were giant, too big; some a little too far—all the usual Goldilocks problems: too small, too large, or

something.

Finally this place, which became Insight Meditation Society in Barre, had been a monastery for the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament. It had eighty little rooms, a swimming pool, a tennis court, and eighty acres of land. There were seven fathers left there and three nuns in the annex. The problem was that during the Jimmy Carter years the price of oil spiked, and they were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars just to heat it so it wouldn't fall apart.

They put it on the market for two million dollars. We negotiated and they said, "How about a million?" Of course we didn't have anything like that at all, but they needed to unload it. Nobody wanted eighty little rooms—what do you do with that?

So anyway, it got down to where we could buy it for $150,000. Eighty acres, swimming pool, tennis court, kitchen. They said, "We'll leave the pots and pans." Phenomenal.

But even that was a lot of money for us ex-hippies. There were a couple of friends who had some family money and they each threw in $15,000. We got $50,000 to start, and then went to the bank to borrow the other $100,000. They were going to sign off for it. The bank said, "What are you doing this for?"

"Well, with IMS, the Insight Meditation Society, we're going to make a meditation center."

They said, "Great, how much do you want?" Because IMS were the same initials as the International Meditation Society of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Beatles. At that time, that was a big thing. "Oh, the Beatles are behind this? No problem. How much money? Where do we sign?"

We did not correct the misperception. They gave us the money.

And what can you buy for $150,000 now? So something mysterious unfolds. As the Ojibwe say, sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

There's something so mysterious about how things unfold. Some of them are terrible—it's not like it's all easy. But we live in something so huge and magnificent, and we get into small mind about how it should be. You don't know. We honestly don't know so much.

So, the last thing I'm going to read from Thich Nhat Hanh:

I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer, I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I'm not limited by this form. I am also now the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. So I don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I'll see you again very soon.'"

This is Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes as if it would be a children's book, but it's like deep children, right?

That day there was a wind blowing, and after a while I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree again. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from the leaf, because it is not afraid. It knew that nothing can be born and nothing can die.

There's something in the stories that we tell. We come together for the Dharma, which means the law, the way things are—and it's really the truth of love. And mystery. Being able to be in the presence of mystery.

It's weird. I don't know how you got in there, in your body. Do you? You don't remember, do you? But you got here for some reason, and then you have this human body, which is a strange thing. I talk about the hole in which you stuff dead plants and animals and grind them up with the bones and glug them through the tube. And then you have eyeballs—they're weird. And ears that stick out, mine pretty far. And then I can wiggle my tongue and say "Eiffel Tower," and you can see the Eiffel Tower in your mind. Nobody knows how that happens. Yeah, the tympanic membrane and the little electrochemical signals to the auditory cortex... "Eiffel Tower"—come on. No one knows how it happens.

You have a little vestigial tail reminding you of your past incarnations. You ambulate by falling one direction as a biped, catching yourself, and then falling the other direction. It's a weird thing. If you don't think that's weird, pay attention when you make love. It's a cool thing to do—I love it—but it's bizarre. It is. I mean, come on, let's get real.

So here we are in this mystery, and part of our meditation is yes, you quiet your mind. Yes, you see that with attachment things get worse, and with love and graciousness things get easier. But also there's this invitation—for liberation and for wonder, instead of holding on.

I mean, can you speak a little bit not about my own intention, but about giving people grace with their intentions?

So keep the microphone for a second because I might want to ask you a question. Thank you for this. This is a really good question. What makes you ask it?

It's a struggle I have. It's a practice to come back to not reacting.

And who are you struggling with? Where is that?

Driving, a lot of the time. Driving in traffic, on the road.

Driving—oh God, those people, yes. And I'm one of them because I was a taxi driver in Boston for three years. I got some very bad driving habits. I apologize.

But all right, so now picture yourself driving and some nasty driver cuts you off, or gets upset and gives you the finger and cuts you off. Close your eyes. All right. So your concern is with their intention. And they might just be pissed off, right, or something. Now notice how it works in you when you see that and you're

upset about their intention. How does that feel? Just notice. What do you notice, keeping your eyes closed, in your body?

Gripping.

Gripping. Tight.

Attachment to the energy.

Yes, attachment. Okay, just feel that. No judgment. You're noticing it.

Now let your attention open as you picture that car that cut you off and that person driving badly. And imagine that they just got the news that their child was in an accident and is in the hospital. Or that their mother fell and is very sick. Or they might get fired and they're so upset and they're trying to race to get there. So there they are, doing the same terrible action, cutting you off and so forth. How does it feel when you picture it then, when you sense that this could also be happening for them? What happens?

There isn't the tension.

It releases the tension. Because you're not so certain that they're just being an asshole, basically, if you'll forgive my language. Right. You might even feel compassion for them if you knew their story.

So here's the thing—this is great, thank you, and thank you for doing that inside. You cannot really know the intention of someone else. There's only one person whose intention you can really know. Guess who that is? As Miss Piggy would say, *moi*, right?

And so intention is primarily for yourself. Because the intentions of other people can be all kinds of things and you can't really know them. But what you can do, and what matters—I think of Thomas Merton writing to this burned-out activist who said, "I just... people are acting so badly, and I don't know if it's going to be worth anything." And Merton says to him, "You have to focus not on what they're doing. The work you do may succeed. It may not. It may make things worse. That's not what's given to you."

You have to focus on your own heart and on the value and the rightness and the truth, the best of the work you do yourself, and leave it to unfold the best it can.

This is a really important question, and you've sort of started to reflect on it yourself, because we can get rather positional when people are behaving badly—and there are lots of them. But we don't know what's behind it all. Some of it may be terrible, and some of it may be that they're really angry, whatever. But even under that, there's something bigger. And what you get to do is to guide your heart through this world and offer blessings even so.

"Thank you for that, beautiful."

Someone else raised their hand on the far other side.

"I just really wanted to thank you very much for bringing me on this journey tonight. I felt like I went through a great deal of inner movement through the metta meditation and also the stories. I've definitely been struggling with some things, and it brought me back to a sense of peace. It really made me feel a lot of gratitude again. I just wanted to thank you."

"Thank you. What are you struggling with, in general? Family? The world?"

"No, just a real kind of existential angst."

"Okay, close your eyes for a moment. You made the mistake of raising your hand—now you're in trouble. And tell me, when you close your eyes and sort of tune in... because you're not the only one. There are a lot of people who have feelings of despair or existential dread or concern. Where do you feel it in your body?"

"Definitely my heart."

"Okay. What does it feel like in your heart?"

"Dense and heavy."

"Dense and heavy. So feel that and let it just be there—dense and heavy—and then wrap it with kindness. Say, 'Thank you for your concern.' You're not judging it. It's actually there because you care a lot. Say, 'Thank you, thank you for your concern. I appreciate that, thank you.' So you're holding it with appreciation and kindness, not trying to get rid of it. Notice what happens when you do this. Does your heart like it?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet. What does your heart say? That's fine. Okay, what does it say? 'Don't try to steamroll me with that love, baby'?"

"No, that's not it. It actually just was... I suddenly was feeling very exposed and vulnerable, and I didn't like it. And I found that when I was doing the metta and I was doing it with myself, that was the most effective thing."

"Beautiful, beautiful. And it's hard when we feel vulnerable. And it's also vulnerable for you to have the mic in front of the whole room of people. That's completely understandable."

I remember this cartoon from Feiffer. There's a woman standing there with her arms crossed across her chest, and there's a man kneeling on one knee with his arms outstretched. He says, "But I love you." And she says, "Don't you threaten me."

We laugh about it because it's familiar to us. We have all of that inside. So when we're vulnerable, that's also what we feel.

And so you want to hold that vulnerability with kindness and say, "I know we're vulnerable. It's all right."

Because I think that if you let yourself feel more deeply into the existential despair or concern or whatever it is, underneath it is tenderness and grief for the world. And it's very soft. And those are good tears. They're called the tears of the way. They're not just "you were abused"—they're tears because you care so much.

And I hear you as someone who actually cares a lot. And then it's very hard to bear sometimes, but you can. The neuroscience description is that our meditation practice expands the window of tolerance of our heart so that we can bear the depth of our tears and the magnificence of our joy and the humor of our follies—all of those things. And so you're learning that. And that's part of the human awakening in someone.

I love the passage at the end of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* where he's finally sitting by the river. You all read it in high school, right? And he hears all the voices in the river—the manly voice and the happy voice and the weeping voice, the childish voice and the vulnerable voice—and he said, "Then I heard it differently, and I heard all of them together as a kind of harmony." It was the music of humanity, of being human, with all the tears and all the magnificence. And he said, "Finally I came to peace." Something like that.

Anyway, thank you for that beautiful question.

Maybe one more before we finish. We don't have to, but you know it's dangerous to raise your hand. But sometimes a brave soul...

Yes, the microphone is coming.

"My husband just said, 'Good luck.'"

Hold it close.

"I don't like that."

Yeah, exactly.

"I feel very vulnerable."

Stop first. Just feel that. Not a bad thing. It's very human. Hold it kindly—metta, compassion, vulnerable. It's just how we are as human beings, and kind of brave to stand up, and beautiful. So okay, you feel this. Now what?

"Well, it's embarrassing to admit how much anger I've been having about a situation that happened."

Is it in your family?

"No, it's ex-business partners. It's business related. It's money related. It's bank related."

Yes.

"And I keep mapping it onto what I'm watching on the news with people being dragged away by ICE and arrested and things like that."

And you want him to be dragged away?

"No. I do. No. I will admit it. I mean, it's terrible. Can I call ICE, by the way?"

I've got to give somebody for you to follow. In my worst moments—go ahead—I want revenge. You know, I do.

And so this has been really lovely, because as we sit in loving kindness... Ram Dass used to say, "All you can do for me is work on yourself, and all I can do for you is work on myself."

And I know that if I really take this into my heart and work on it, it's possible that I'll get to loving kindness and forgiveness and all of that. Where I'm struggling is—and I've said this to my husband—I feel like I will need to say the truth somewhere. Like I need to write a letter to various people and entities and say the truth about how unjust this is. And then I will be able to let go. And I don't know, maybe that's not true. I just don't know what to do with it.

All right, so first, be with the not knowing. Not knowing is not a bad place. It's actually a place where you learn things.

Okay.

Secondly, I don't know—is there anyone else in this room who has ever had thoughts of revenge? Don't bother raising your hands. We know.

I think it would be really interesting for you to write the letters. I'm not saying you should mail them, but take it a step at a time. Because in something you're saying, "I need to be witnessed in this. I need others to see this." Maybe you want them to see who you are, that you're the good person and he—or whatever that person, I assume it's a he, it could be a she—is the bad guy.

Yeah, that may be so. There are a lot of bad guys out there, by the way. If you want to write letters, I can give you a list. But this is your personal bad guy.

My bad guy, right.

So you write those letters and you look at them, and you feel into your heart. You say, "Do I need to send this? Is this really going to make things better?"

And there might be one that you really need to say. And then you look, and you ask two questions really.

Is it true? Is it kind? Those are the principles of the Eightfold Path, of wise speech, right speech. Is it true? And is it kind? And you look and you say, well, it's kind of bitter, as a matter of fact. So maybe I'll rewrite it a little. I want to say this. And then you look: What's my intention?

So what you're doing is you're turning what you need to do—which is to release this from your heart—into a practice. It may be to send it, it may just be to write it, feel it, rewrite it a few times. Maybe you write it and then you do a ritual and you burn it and you say, "I'm just ready to let this go. I don't even want to think about this person except to wish them well, and we're done." There are all kinds of things you can do.

So it's really good that you bring it up, because you're not the only one in the room with that. And you can't hurry it. You can't kind of cover it over. "Okay, I'll forgive, you know. I still hate him, but I will forgive." It doesn't work that way.

Yeah.

How's this landing?

It's good. It's good. I want to hurry the not knowing what to do part. Like, I want to know—

And you want to know, do it—

And I want to, you know... because I want it settled.

Yes, you want it settled.

Yeah.

So, okay, pause for a moment. Just tell me, how hard is it to stay in the not knowing? Is it scary?

Oh, yeah. Is it?

Okay, so feel that. Hold it, wrap it with some kindness, because we all have that. Don't-know mind—you're staying with not knowing. Ajahn Chah used to say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" Can you get comfortable with uncertainty right now? It's unresolved. It's painful to feel it. Wrap it with kindness and say, "Yeah." Can you bear it? Can you?

"Yeah."

Because then it slows it down a little. Then you're not quite so desperate. How's that?

"That's good. It's not like I've never done that before. I've been in some pretty scary places not knowing."

So thank you. Thank you.

I shouldn't tell this story, but a very close friend of mine, a colleague and teacher, told me that her best

friend, when they were living somewhere in the Midwest, was jilted by her boyfriend in a pretty painful and bad way. She was so upset. And then he was very pleased with himself because he had bought a fancy new pickup truck and lived some towns over. So in the middle of the night, she drove to where his truck was, threw a Molotov cocktail into it, and it burned. She drove away. No one saw it. Some days later, she got a message from her ex saying, "The weirdest thing happened—my truck burned." He never found out.

And I have to say, even though it was a bad and terrible thing that she did, there was a part of me that smiled about it and said, "Go girl." You know, we have all these parts. Let's be honest about it. You don't want to do it where you hurt somebody, and you don't want to do it where you hurt yourself. You're better than that, bigger than that, more loving than that. And I see that in your care, and I believe it. But it is fun to tell the story anyway, you've got to admit.

Okay though, so let's sit for a couple of minutes and return to metta, to the great heart of loving-kindness. As you breathe gently, you can hold your own complicated life with kindness, with compassion. And you can be a lighthouse, a lamp—"make of yourself a light," the Buddha's last words. Shine kindness. No matter—people are difficult, good, bad, everything in between. And in the middle of it all, you can rest in the great heart of kindness and love. Because it's who you really are. It's what we want for this world. And you become that. It alleviates your suffering and it tamps down the suffering of others. It's your gift.

So thank you for your kind attention, for the brave ones who raised their hand, for all of you. Thank you to the people who bought this book—my publisher will be really happy. And thank you for being part of Spirit Rock, online or in person. We need community these days, a lot.

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So I'm grateful. Go out into the evening, drive politely if you can, and we'll see you again.

And remember—you don't have to eat all the pea soup.

Thank you for listening.

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