Solstice

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:34:29

So here we are, mid-December, not many days before the winter solstice.

One of the beautiful things about living in Marin County where Spirit Rock is located is that there's a group of people who, now for many years, do a trek around Mount Tamalpais—the central mountain in the middle of Marin County, about 2,600 feet. In the morning of the solstice, starting in the dark, they carry candles and sometimes sing and chant. It's as if they bring their voices together with the turning, the music of the spheres.

I remember years ago going to the top of Mount Tamalpais one day when I learned there was a passage of the planet Venus across the face of the sun. I got up there and a number of people had set up their telescopes, some of them quite big. I got to look in the eyepiece of one of the biggest telescopes, and there was the orange-red, roiling, round disk of the face of the sun. It's not at all static when you look closely—it's like all these little wiggly lines of fire and energy moving. It's really quite extraordinary.

On one side of this big orange disk was a little round black pebble that was blocking out the light, pebble-sized as it moved over the course of a few hours across the face of the sun. What was amazing to see, for me anyway, was to feel that here we are on planet Earth, which is about the same size as Venus, and we too are circling our star. You could feel it—this huge star, and then lots of space, and then this tiny black circle going across the sun. If someone were on Mars, they might see the tiny black circle of the Earth sometimes going across the face of the sun. We're in this cosmic dance, the music of the spheres.

So now the time of solstice has come for us. The beautiful thing about solstice is that it invites us to stop, to pause—like a sacred pause—to take a breath. Because the meaning of solstice (sol is sun) is that the sun stands still for a moment. And we get to stand still. When we do stand still, we can see in a new and different way.

I want to read a tiny poem from Crowfoot, one of the Blackfoot Nation elders:

What is life?
It is the flash of a firefly in the night.
It is the breath of a buffalo in wintertime.
It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in sunset.

Disappear in the flash of the firefly. This is us. We feel very permanent to ourselves, but actually it's all this amazing, ever-changing dance.

What you get to do, and what we get to do together now, is some meditation—to take our seat at what the poet T.S. Eliot called the still point of the turning worlds.

So settle yourself. We'll sit for twenty-five minutes or so. Find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease. Let yourself sink down into this seat or the chair or wherever you are. Feel the solidity beneath your seat that goes all the way down to the center of the earth. You're held by Mother Earth as you take your seat—your seat at the still point in the middle of all the turning.

Let your eyes close gently. Take two or three long breaths. Let things relax as you do. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Maybe let your head move in a little circle to release your neck and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and let arms and hands rest easily. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, ready to receive whatever arises with a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, bring your mindful loving awareness to feel and sense and notice how your body is breathing itself just now. No need to change or alter anything, just to kindly notice. As you relax, you'll become aware that you are being breathed—that the earth is breathing you, your body and the ocean of air in a dance together.

Relax with it. Soften. Let each breath come and go as it will, feeling the rhythm of life moving through your body.

This breath, if you're in North America, came across the Pacific Ocean. It dusted the tops of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa in Hawaii. It dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor in Japan. It moved across the waves of the ocean, the sea of air, and now comes into your own lungs and body, gently and graciously. Receive it with kindness.

Thich Nhat Hanh recommends adding a soft whisper of a word as you breathe. Calm. Or ease. In the background, very softly—ease or calm—as the breath breathes itself. Let the awareness of the breath be an invitation for the whole body, heart, and mind to quiet, to calm, to settle.

You might feel the movement of breath as coolness in the nostrils, the air coming in and out, or on the upper lip. Perhaps you'll feel it as the rise and fall of chest or belly. Let it breathe itself. And if you have any difficulty sensing the breath—if it's soft, hard to feel, or there's too much else going on—take one hand and put it on your belly and feel the belly rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you sense the breath, naturally after a bit of time, the attention will wander. It might be a breath or two later or six breaths later—no matter. You can notice where it's wandered very gently. Let the thoughts or plans or memories or sensations, the images, the emotions, whatever pulls you from the breath, let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Notice if you've been carried off by a thought or an emotion. If you like, you can whisper gently: thinking, remembering, planning. Or sadness, excitement, love, fear.

When you notice the thought or the feeling, let it go, sink back like the waves of the ocean. Just acknowledge gently—oh yes, sadness or excitement or planning—and come back to the next breath. Rest your loving awareness with the sensations of the breath or the rise and fall in the palm of your hand. Let things quiet, steady.

When you notice that a wave has arisen around the breath and pulls the attention away, acknowledge it kindly with loving awareness. Remembering. Planning. Thinking. Worrying. Delighting. Let that simple acknowledgement be enough. Let that experience, like the waves of the ocean, dissolve. Return back for a few more breaths, training the mind and heart and breath to be together, breath by breath.

Thich Nhat Hanh recommends putting a half smile on your lips. Notice the breathing body with loving awareness—this breath and this one—kindly, with ease, a steady and calm presence, returning over and over to the breath very gently. Each time a wave arises and carries the attention, name it gently. If it feels really strong—a strong pain, a great moment of sadness or elation or delighting or fear, a compelling plan—you can stay with it for a little bit. Name it gently. Planning. You can say thank you. What a beautiful plan. Thank you. Celebration—something good has happened. Let yourself feel it with loving awareness, and then let it go.

You become the silent loving witness to the breath, the breath of life, and this helps you to quiet the mind and tend the heart. You become the loving witness of the waves of human experience. Imagination and judgment, connection, all the emotions, ideas—they rise and fall like waves. And you are the still point. The silent center. You are the loving awareness itself, noticing it all, kindly. This breath.

This moment.

It doesn't matter how long the attention wanders or drifts. The beautiful thing is the moment that you reawaken and say, "Oh yes, here we are, this timeless moment." And the loving awareness acknowledges just this, just now. The spacious awareness of the breath and the world itself rising and passing away. And you are silent and loving in the middle of it all.

The still point. Silent, loving awareness. Just here.

The still point of the turning world. It's a refreshing thing to do, to sit with a mindful, loving presence as the breath breathes itself and the waves of experience arise and pass. It puts us more in harmony with the real rhythms of life.

It's a pleasure to come and sit together as we did. Monday Night Sitting Group is now in its forty-first year—forty-one years of teaching this, starting in someone's living room in San Anselmo and in the Fairfax Community Church, and then for a long time, thirty-five years, on the land at Spirit Rock. To be

able to come together and not do anything is an extraordinary thing in our culture and our time. You have to admit, we get so busy. There's so many things and so much input and so much to tend to.

And then the solstice comes. The mystery of the solstice—the sun standing still for a moment, as it was believed, changing course and coming back. It's a timeless pause, a sacred pause really. In the Northern hemisphere for us, it's the pause in the darkness, in the fertile darkness from which everything comes.

We live in a culture that's in many ways characterized by the absence of the sacred. Christmas is primarily about shopping, among other things, and family—beautiful things—but not much about sacred silence and mystery. The question is, how do we hold this human life that we've been given, especially without the sacred rituals of old? The fact that we can come together and sit in silence is already a beautiful thing. Listen to the body and the heart and the world.

And it's not easy. From the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddhist words: "It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not." This is the uncertainty of samsara, of existence. All things are impermanent. These were among the last words of the Buddha: awaken to this.

When we sit still, we also feel how much we carry of the movement and the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows. For now, there have been mass shootings and the tremendous grief and inhumanity of them. The anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-immigrant sentiment. The continuing warfare and divisiveness and growing dictatorships.

In some way, many of us are touched more by the shootings—the school shootings and that kind of violence—than we are by the tens of thousands of people who have died or are under siege in Sudan, or the Rohingya who fled the horrible treatment in Burma. There's something about it being more immediate and small and understandable. And it's heartbreaking to carry all this. It's part of being human. Birth and death. Joy and sorrow. Gain and loss. Fame and disrepute.

And while on one side there are the wars and the shootings and the divisiveness, today on this earth there are 249,762 new babies born. They came out saying, "Look, I'm here! I'm with you." Every day, a quarter of a million new people saying, "Hey, count me in."

I don't know how it happens. I mean, I do know.

Their mothers carry them and give birth to them. That's an astonishing, weird, amazing thing—that we grow in the body of another person, our mother, and then we come out and say, "I'm here. Let me have a life."

And so there's all the suffering, and there's also the unbearable beauty of it. Of a single tree. Or a flower. Or the field of lilies. Or the beauty of a sunset.

I was reading this poem by an Inuit poet living up past the Arctic Circle, and he was celebrating the magic

of sunrise, the amazing thing when the sun rises. And then I realized—oh, he's talking about the fact that he hasn't seen the sun for three or four months and now it's coming back. This is a really amazing thing. It's returned. But he says, what a magical thing for the sun to rise and fill the world with light every single day, and fill the world with 250,000 new babies.

So here we are in this mystery. How do we hold it? What do we do with it?

For many years—for more than fifty years—I worked together with a very dear heart friend and colleague, Stanislav Grof, who was the last legitimate LSD researcher in the late 1960s and early seventies at Johns Hopkins University, before it was all shut down. He'd come from Prague. And then after LSD was made illegal, teaching together with Stan and all these other people who were still very interested in the transformation of consciousness that psychedelics could offer, he developed with his wife Christina a very deep holotropic breathwork process. People would breathe in this intense way with music, and it would open them very much like psychedelics.

Of course, we'd been working together a long time, and I was quite tuned to it because I'd been in a Burmese monastery of Sunlun Sayadaw, where we would sit several times a day for an hour or an hour and a half without moving. And the first forty-five minutes of it was to breathe as hard and fast as you could. The Sayadaw, the teacher there, said, "The modern world is too distracted. We need something to really help you find your attention." Close your eyes, and he would ring this huge gong at the end of the room. Then, kind of like a coach, he'd say, "All right, now get to it, start breathing." Periodically he would encourage: "Breathe harder, breathe faster"—for forty-five minutes. Then he would ring the gong and everything would get silent. And he'd say, "Stay in that silent openness and notice what wants to open for the next forty-five minutes." We'd do that two or three times a day. It was quite wild.

So we did the same in holotropic breathwork, and Stan added this whole sequence of driving and compelling music that would start soft and then have a beat to help people breathe. If you walked into the room—we often worked in groups of two or three hundred people, and they would be paired up, someone lying there breathing while the other person sat with them, tending to anything they needed: a glass of water, a blanket, being held, whatever—you'd walk into the room with a few hundred people breathing to this loud, amazing, shamanic kind of music. It was a little like going into Dante's Divine Comedy.

There would be thirty people in the middle of getting born, some birth process coming out, or being the mother giving birth to them. And there'd be twenty people over there who were dying in different ways—some with memories of having been in battles in past lives, or dying old, or dying young, or remembering being with someone else who died and feeling that whole process. And some of them were in bliss, just in these divine heaven realms, beatific smiles radiating light. And some of them were struggling like they were in Dante's lower realms of pain and suffering, reliving trauma. It was all there.

And the amazing thing is, it's all in here. We carry all of this. As Whitman says, we are larger than we think, because you are the universe—it's all inside you, all of that. "We contain multitudes," he said.

One of my favorite group meditation practices—something I'll do at a retreat like the Ram Dass retreat or others I've done for years—is to have people pair off and look in each other's eyes. Particularly to evoke the divine abodes of the Buddhist teachings, the four immeasurables or the Brahmaviharas of the awakened heart: love and compassion, joy and peace.

People gaze at each other for ten, fifteen minutes, and they fall in love with each other. They see the beauty behind the eyes, and this great love comes. They see the measure of sorrows that everyone carries, the struggles in every life, and great compassion awakens as they gaze. Joy, the child of the spirit.

And then finally, in the section of peace and equanimity, the awakened heart, they're now invited to gaze even more deeply, in a timeless way, and to see that at another time and another place, the person across from you has been your mother or father or your child—your son or your daughter—or your teacher, or your student.

And they continue to gaze. The Tibetans say that every being you meet—there have been so many countless lifetimes—every being you meet has been your mother at some other time. But here, gazing, you really see it.

What it would have been like to have that person be your mother, or father, or daughter, or son, teacher, or student. And then one of the wild ones: at some other time and place, they were your friend, and you feel this warmth of heart. And then you look deeper, and in another time and place, they were your enemy. And it's amazing how in just a few seconds, the gaze changes and you see how they could be your enemy. Because we are large and we contain multitudes. We contain so much. All of it possible.

And when you see in this way, you start to see in a timeless way, just as we did when we took that seat, the still point in the middle of all life. When you can really gaze at another, or gaze at this mystery of the little planets going around our fiery star, and we're the little bugs on this planet—there's this tiny little planet across the face of the sun and it has all these little bugs on it. That's us. Bugs are us.

When we see in this timeless way, we see life. We see each person, the ones in our gaze, in our eyes. What opens is mercy, tenderness, love. Because then what matters? Here we are in this human incarnation. We get quiet. The world is turning. The spheres, the music of the spheres, are dancing. And our life, as the Buddha said—did we think that it was permanent? It's dancing too. We have a beginning and changes and changes, evolution of our own physical body and heart and mind. And then this particular dance ends, and you'll see—you'll be surprised or not when you float out of your body. Wow, that was an amazing incarnation, wasn't it? Wow.

But then what matters? What opens is tenderness, compassion, love, mercy.

I remember teaching with Stephen Levine, wonderful dear friend, colleague, meditation teacher. He worked a lot with people who were in hospice or dying or attending the dying. And one of the questions he would come to as the retreat went on—he would have people practice, say, "Imagine this is your last

day. You have one more day on this earth in this incarnation." And after people had a few moments to imagine that, he would say, "Who would you call? What would you say?" And then: "Why are you waiting?"

It was that third question that was the killer, right? Who would you call? And why are you waiting? Why are you waiting to speak from that place of tenderness and love and mercy—or whatever matters?

William Blake said that if we are to do good on this earth, in this human life, it must be done in the minute particulars, in the immediate particulars. General good, he went on, is the plea of the flatterer, the scoundrel, and the liar. The minute particulars.

So here it is. This is from Mark Morford's commentary. He says: "Stop thinking our global crisis is all there is. Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and shooting and environmental disaster, there are a thousand counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty, all happening all over the world right now on a breathtaking scale. From flower box to cathedral, resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel. Realize that this is the perfect moment to re-envision the enchantment of the world, to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume right when it seems dark, bitter, offensive, acrimonious, conflicted, bilious. There's your opening right here. Remember mystery. Believe in the seeds that you plant."

As Thoreau said, "I am prepared to expect miracles." Let the seeds be part of a groundswell of resistance, each a seemingly small but actually very, very large and important karmic shift that's happening.

The beginning of something new and potent and unstoppable.

Here's an old story for you, because it is the solstice and the holiday time.

A light drizzle was falling as my sister Jill and I ran out of the Methodist church. This was Christmas morning in 1951. Across the street from the church was a Pan Am gas station where the Greyhound bus stopped. It was closed for Christmas, and I noticed a family standing outside there.

Once we got home, there was barely time to enjoy our presents. We had to go off to our grandparents'. And as we piled back in the car with our presents, my father began to drive more slowly. He noticed the family that was still sitting there outside the closed gas station in the cold. The closer we got, the slower the car went. Suddenly my father pulled over and said, "I can't stand it."

"What?" asked my mother.

"It's that family back there at Pan Am, standing in the rain and the snow. They've got children. It's Christmas."

When my father pulled over into the service station, I saw that there were five of them. Parents, three

children—two girls and a small boy. My father rolled down his window. "Merry Christmas," he said.

"Howdy," the man replied. He was tall and had to stoop slightly to peer into the car. Jill, Sharon, and I stared at the three children outside.

"Waiting on the bus?" my father asked, as the children stared back.

The man said they were going to Birmingham, where he had a brother and prospects of a job.

"Well, that bus isn't going to come along for some hours, and you're getting wet standing here. Windburn's just a couple miles up the road. They've got a shed with a cover there, some benches," my father said. "Why don't you all get in the car and I'll run you up there?"

The man thought about it for a moment, then beckoned to his family. They climbed in the car. No luggage, only the clothes they were wearing. Once they were settled in, my father looked back over his shoulder and asked the children if Santa had found them yet. Three glum faces.

"I think so," said my father, winking at my mother. "Because when I saw Santa this morning, he told me he was having trouble finding y'all and asked me if he could leave your toys at our house. We'll go get them before I take you to the bus stop."

When we got out of the car at our house, the three children ran through the front door straight to the toys that were spread out under our Christmas tree. One of the girls spied Jill's doll and immediately hugged it to her breast. Another girl picked up something of mine. All this happened a long time ago, but the memory of it remains clear. This was the Christmas when my sisters and I learned the joy of making others happy.

My mother noticed that the middle child was wearing a short-sleeved dress, so she gave the girl Jill's only sweater to wear. My father invited them to join us at grandparents' for Christmas dinner, but the parents refused.

Back in the car on the way to Windburn, my father asked the man if he had money for the bus fare. His brother had sent the ticket, the man said. My dad reached into his pocket and pulled out five dollars, which was all he had left until his next payday. He pressed the money into the man's hand. The man tried to give it back, but my father insisted. "It'll be late when you get to Birmingham, and these children will be hungry before then. Take it. I've been broke before. I know what it's like when you can't feed your family."

We left them there at the bus stop in Windburn. And as we drove away, I watched out the window as long as I could, looking back at the little girl hugging her new doll.

This is what we remember, you know, in the Buddhist teachings about the end of life.

One of the beautiful teachings is to say that as you approach your death, as you approach the end of your life, think back and bring into the heart and mind a few things, a few moments of goodness that you

participated in. It doesn't have to be Mother Teresa building a nonprofit and saving thousands of lives. A few moments of goodness that gladden the heart—it makes such a difference to do so.

And here we are, the solstice coming, and there are thousands of acts of staggering generosity all day long. Mothers putting their tortillas and rice gruel and croissant or whatever it happens to be, the millet, in the bowls of their children. People helping one another who are having trouble walking or opening a door or crossing the street.

The solstice invites us to see with the eyes of wonder. And things keep getting reborn. Every day, there are a hundred billion new blood cells born in your body. Two million blood cells in a second. I say that sentence and you've got ten million new blood cells. How does that happen? They're busy replicating and making new cells. It's extraordinary. And you get half a million new skin cells every hour, so that when you reach over and kiss someone's cheek, you leave a few skin cells, you take some, they drop on the floor. It's okay, your body says, here's another half million in the next hour.

I remember going to where there'd been a big forest fire in Point Reyes National Park and being shocked two years later—because it's an area where there's rain, so it's not slow like a desert to rebuild itself—and there were bushes and trees already. It was like filling itself up. Life does not want to stop.

And I remember being in the hospital with my twin brother when he was dying of blood cancer. He was in this great giant hospital, and about every twenty or thirty minutes, there would be this beautiful chime that came over the loudspeaker. A nurse came in and I said, "What's that chime?" And she said, "Oh, a baby's been born."

It's so amazing what we are and how we sit. The eyes of wonder, astonishing. And the solstice says, yes, here we are. Let's just stop and listen. And then the heart can't do anything but tenderness and mercy when we really listen. We light our candles to remember, to join in, to carry our inner beauty and join it with the light of the heart of the world, of so many beings. So many staggering acts of generosity.

One more story, another tearjerker—forgive me. My daughter was telling me about how she was hanging out downtown with a friend this weekend when a very visibly pregnant woman with a thirteen-month-old toddler in a stroller approached her. The woman needed money for a hotel room. It was nighttime and she and her baby were cold. A stranger had given them a blanket but didn't want to give her the ninety dollars she needed for a hotel room in case it was a scam. So my daughter sent her seventy dollars by an app on the spot, and her friend gave her all the cash he had in his wallet. She had more than ninety.

When I asked her about it, my daughter told me she would rather be the kind of person who got scammed out of seventy dollars than the kind of person who didn't help a mama and her baby sleep in a warm place. That's what you carry. That's who you really are. That's what was born in you—the great heart of compassion and tenderness.

So the goal: to see this world with mercy, with tenderness, to see it with the eyes of wonder.

Sharon Salzberg, beloved loving-kindness teacher, colleague, friend for fifty years—when she was in India, because she'd suffered tremendously, she really had a background of great trauma, and she had an ability to take that and turn it and go very deep. She became a really profound meditator in a year or two with her teacher. And one day, this was maybe 1971, somebody gave her a copy of the new book at the time called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. And she looked at it, a Zen book, Beginner's Mind—she said, "I'm not a beginner," and tossed it aside, so she says. And then a little while later, some days later, she picked it up, thumbed through it, and she read the beginning, the astonishing, beautiful words of Suzuki Roshi: that the goal of meditation is always to keep your beginner's mind, to see with eyes of mindful, loving awareness.

And when we sit together in that stillness, it's as if it invites in us the birth of the child of the spirit—to quiet the mind, to tend the heart. That's meditation. Mystery, quiet, tend, open.

And then what? You know, in Zen, there are only two things. You sit and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. This is what we're here for. We sit and quiet the mind and open the heart. And then we add our gifts. We add our light. We add our heart, our understanding to this troubled and magnificent and amazing and beautiful world.

The great explorer Wade Davis explained, despair is a failure of imagination. And so when you tend the garden, it doesn't have to be grand. It doesn't have to be the great nonprofit, the Mother Teresa sleeping on the streets with the dying homeless in Calcutta. As she started, you can start small. You get quiet and you ask yourself, what wants to be born? What can I touch in the fabric of the world with the light of my own heart and mercy? Where can I mend a little bit of that fabric? My words, my care, my energy, my gifts, my resources.

Here's a story. You may have heard it, but it's worthy for the time of the approaching solstice.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a tiny mouse asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," came the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the tiny mouse replied. "I sat on a branch of a fir tree close to its trunk when it began to snow. Not a blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without a sound, without any violence, and having nothing better to do"—and you've all been in those quiet snowstorms—"I decided to count the snowflakes settling on the twigs of my branch. And the number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you would say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the mouse went away. And the dove, an authority on spiritual matters since the time of Noah, thought about this to herself and said, "Perhaps there's only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in this world."

You have gifts. You have a light that you carry. You can see it in others. You want to protect it. You want to share it. And when you do, you become a bodhisattva—not in some grand "sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all" kind of way, but the bodhisattva who turns her heart to compassion, to care for all she encounters. Even if the sun should arise in the West, the bodhisattva has only one way.

No matter what happens, this is the light of your heart. This is what you're here for—to add your gifts and your light to yourself too. You know how that goes.

And remember the instructions from the Buddha, from the verses in the Dhammapada, some of the most beloved verses repeated for 2,600 years again and again: Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate. Live in joy, in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, be still, free from fears and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way, the Dharma, bringing that joy into the world.

Solstice—a great invitation. Take your time. Time stops. It's timeless. It says, listen. What really matters? Who would you call? What would you say? Why are you waiting?

It was so great. Stephen would just get everybody to stop for a moment and go, "Oh, yeah." So beautiful. And you are that. You are that. That's what's born in you, and you get to give it. That's what you're here for.

And so the great Christian theologian and mystic Howard Thurman says: "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas year round begins. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the peoples, and to make music in the heart."

So let's sit for a few moments. Just notice, rest.

All right, dear ones. We have a bit of time for dialogue—questions, reports, descriptions of what's happening. You can raise your hand. *Sobat* is what the Sufis call it, which is a conversation of the heart.

"Hi, Jack."

"Hi, Susie."

"It's been many, many years that we've been sitting on Monday nights."

"Yes, many, many years."

"And I left Marin and here I am in San Diego. That was many years ago. I wrote my first book of fiction, and one of the reviews said, 'My mother was a drug addict. I could never understand why this happened to her until I read this little book. And I got it. And it wasn't my fault.' It was such an amazing thing to have happen. I've worked with tons of women and children who have been in terrible situations, but to know that just this tiny book reaches out to someone's heart—it just made me so open, and I was so grateful to be able to reach out and still touch people at eighty in San Diego."

"Hey, you look pretty good for eighty."

"So do you! We're a month apart. We're hanging in there."

"Yeah, we are. I look like my grandmother."

"Well, you do as well. That happens. I have a grandfather, yeah."

"So, Susie, I have to say—I want to raise my candle up for you. The fact that you were able to touch this person's heart like that, this is the kind of thing you remember at the end of your life. Just that one thing makes such a difference in this world. And I'm so touched by it. For those of us who live with a lot of suffering in our families—yes, there's enormous suffering in societies, in the world—but children tend to think it's their fault. Because to think it's the big people's fault is scarier."

It's terrifying to contemplate. What do I do with that? But if you think it's your fault, you think, well, maybe if I make myself better, things will change. And your gift to her was such a beautiful gift. Thank you.

I love you so much.

Well, I love you too. This is wonderful.

Happy eighty. You've got some more beautiful things to do.

We both do.

Peace out.

Good solstice to you.

I just want to thank you for that dharma talk. It's just what I needed, and I feel really opened and hopeful and connected to sangha. I really appreciate the words that you share.

Thank you so much. I just want to stay with you for a moment because there's a little glow. I'm very glad about that. Does it inspire you to manifest in any particular way? Just curious.

Well, I think I've been struggling with negativity around me. It inspires me to hold my course.

And is it people around you, or is it the culture, the politics?

Well, it's probably everything, but it's some people. I moved away from my home where I've lived for many, many years. I moved down to Marin County to be near my grandkids, which is wonderful, but I haven't found my dear friends and family. So I'm around people whose outlook on life isn't where I want my path to be going.

Pause for a moment. This is really important, what you're talking about. Yes, there is negativity around, and people we know are in the society at large. That's part of the game. There were these monks and nuns who came to the Buddha and said, "Things are really negative around us. Maybe we should leave, go somewhere else." And he said, "Do you think you won't find it somewhere else? We stay." Then he said, "Stay. Hold the course. Stay with what's true for you."

Stay with what's true for you, which is your carrying of the light you have. If you could put it in a sentence or two, what would that message be? That's your message, not theirs.

Nothing's permanent. And just go towards the love. That's what helps. Go toward the love.

I'll put it on a bumper sticker. I like it. Especially since you're driving and you're going somewhere, you might as well drive toward the love.

Thank you, Claire.

Hi, Jack.

Hi, Toby. Hello, dear.

First of all, thank you, because no matter what happens, every so often I think, "Oh God, there's so much anger and violence and malice going on—how do you do anything about it?"

When 9/11 happened, I was in a skyscraper in New York, and people were telling me there might be another plane coming. I remember thinking, "If I die today, at least everybody that I love knows I love them." I remember thinking, okay, I really don't want to die, but at least that. At least that.

And so over the years since then, I've thought about what happens to the people who don't know that anybody loves them. There are so many kinds of love—I don't mean it has to even be personal. I do volunteer work, and I get to see a lot of people. And I realized how many of them have no idea that anybody sees them at all.

This is why I love the story about the dove, because I think maybe just to make a little difference—a little branch, maybe, for that dove to land on.

I've always been, although most people don't believe it, really shy. I feel I don't want to be intrusive. And I finally thought: just do it. So what if they don't like it?

I chose one person in particular who had what we might call a menial but really important job, because this is a rehab hospital. Nobody speaks to her, and she speaks to nobody. One time I asked her what she was doing for Thanksgiving. She said, "Oh, I'm feeding the homeless."

A couple of months later, I said, "Can I speak to you?" She said, "Is something wrong?" And I said, "No, I have a little gift for you, because I thought of you the other day and I thought how remarkable you are. And I bet nobody here knows." She said, "No, they don't. They don't know." She said, "This is wonderful. You made my day."

Now she waves to me. She smiles. And I thought, it's not a big thing, but at least she knows.

I've tried this in different ways. It's not about me—it's about seeing this response of somebody. Someone said to me, "This is about love." And it is about love. I found myself so much more open. My husband would laugh when a good waiter would come on a busy day and I'd say, "Should I tell your manager?" And then he saw them say, "Don't move—my manager's over there. I'm bringing him over this minute to hear that you thought I was good."

So what you did for me tonight, and you've done it for forty years—thank you—is that you let me see that maybe it's not unimportant. Maybe it's something to just keep doing, because maybe I might be the only voice that person hears. And if so, maybe that counts.

So touched. I'd like you to look at all the little people in the squares on the screen. See them, and realize that what you just described, you can do that. They're all now being seen and recognized and kind of loved up by you. You can do that.

Even tonight, what you described, that woman didn't know she was being recognized. Her beauty wasn't being seen. And there they are, all these people, many of them smiling, being acknowledged. I hope—because I think this is what we can do for each other. Maybe we can't contribute financially or maybe we can't physically do some things, but we can see each other.

And the thing it's done for me is it has convinced me how many more wonderful, beautiful people there are in this world than nasty, vindictive, or disturbed people. And I'm so much richer for knowing that. In so many ways.

Thank you, Toby.

Thank you, Jack. That's a gift.

You have really made this possible.

Well, you too. We're in it together.

Let's do one more. Nancy.

Hi, Nancy.

I don't know if you remember me, but a couple months ago you were doing a talk and I had just been to Homeboy Industries. So we were talking about the wonderful work that he does, just loving

everyone—loving even the... He does work with gang members who've killed people, and he just loves them. He loves them back to sanity and he loves them back to wholeness.

That has really been helpful in my life, to love family members that are having a hard time. But I have to say that just recently I read your book, *A Path with Heart*, finally. I think I had read it once before, because when I went to find it on my Kindle, it was there already. And at the very end of it, you describe how when you were a monk, at one point you were asked to bow to the leaders, to the teachers. And that was fine. And then you were asked to bow to your peers, and that was a little bit difficult. But eventually you loved it, because you could see the respect. And you realized that bowing to every single person, no matter who they are or what they do... at least this is what I got out of it. And all of a sudden I realized that respect is just as important as love—or it's kind of like a different kind of love. Anyway, that really touched me deeply, and I thank you for it.

I thank you too. And I want to acknowledge a couple of things. Yes, I remember our conversation. So for those listening, if you have not read Father Greg Boyle's book *Tattoos on the Heart*, it's one of the most astonishing modern books of spiritual teaching that I could recommend to anyone. The fact that he does that work, as you say, with gang members who've been shooting at each other, and then they're there in the same room with him, ones who are enemies—his wisdom and his big heart is enough to hold them all. It's just remarkable.

And then you say maybe respect is love, which is one of the themes of the beginning of this new book I have. I start with a story that I've told here probably recently, of a little boy who goes out to a restaurant. He's seven years old, with his parents. The waitress comes and says, "What will you have?" And he says, "I'd like a hot dog and a Coke." And his mom says, "He'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a glass of milk." The waitress takes all the other orders, and then as she's leaving the table, she looks back at the little boy and says, "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?" And he lights up and says, "She thinks I'm real."

And when you talk about love being respect, it really is a dimension of love—to see with the eyes of respect for everybody. Part of it is to see also what they've suffered. Some of the people who are doing the most egregious things have also suffered: their mental illness, or the suffering of their community, or all kinds of other things. And just from the heart to see with respect everybody's journey.

It doesn't mean you can't stand up, you can't stop. Thank you to Ahmad Ahmed, who grabbed that guy in Sydney with his gun and stopped him from killing more people. Hallelujah. Thank you for doing that. Doesn't mean you can't stand up, but you can do it with love. And that's really what you're saying.

He transforms these guys, and some of them are like his top administrators now. It's just magnificent to see how these people can transform, how we all have the capability of transforming our lives. Seeing the goodness in each being.

And I just thank you for your stories tonight. The snowflake story—there's one person who maybe can change peace for the world. And that can be you or me or any of us tonight.

So let's pause, because I want everybody who's listening to hear that this last half hour or however long it's been, I haven't been actually teaching. I've been going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, great, thank you." Because the teachings have been coming so beautifully. It's crowdsourced now. We're all carrying it. And we're all carrying our light.

So let's pause for a minute. And just let yourself reflect and sense—as the world is turning and the solstice is coming and the great cosmic pause, the sacred pause—sense that you're here for something, here to add your gifts, here to add your light. And it starts exactly here, where we are. Like the snowflakes, every gesture and voice and moment of respect. What a gift you carry. That's who you are. Don't be shy.

So let's just be quiet for thirty seconds. Maybe look at the screen if you want while you're quiet and beam a little love and light to all the faces in the little squares. Lots of people we know, some we don't know. They're all weird, you know? Take a look, right? Aren't we? And they're all immensely interesting and wild and lovable. They all have a light. They all carry something beautiful. Every one of them.

So thank you, dear ones. Have good holy days, as they're called. It's not just about shopping. It is the holy days. And I'll see you anon. Take good care.

See?

So thank you, dear ones. Have good holy days—as they're called. It's not just about shopping; these truly are the holy days. I'll see you anon. Take good care.

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