Living with Freedom and Love

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:41:44

It seems especially important in these somewhat chaotic and, for many people, uncertain and difficult times that we find a way to come together and link our hands and our hearts and our consciousness in a way that brings out benevolence and goodness and courage and presence and love—all those values that are central to the teachings of the Buddha, but that are really part of all natural and wise spiritual life.

Monday nights, for me—I began teaching them more than forty years ago, in the mid-1980s. Over the first thirty-plus years, I taught them every week, which was wonderful, often in person at Spirit Rock. Now, in this cycle of pulling back a bit in certain ways from teaching, I do them periodically for Spirit Rock. What I love about them is they're a way for me to both speak things that are tender and important and hopefully helpful to you—drawing from more than fifty years of practice and teaching as a Buddhist teacher and psychologist—and equally to connect with you in the questions and responses.

Whatever brings you this evening, wherever you are, you're truly welcome. Spirit Rock is a welcoming place that invites you to take your seat among the generations and thousands of years of people who have practiced compassion, loving-kindness, mindfulness, and liberation.

So let's begin. Let yourself find a way to sit that's stable and comfortable and at ease. Once you find a stable way to sit, when you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently. Perhaps take two or three long breaths to help you settle.

The spirit of tonight's meditation of mindful, loving awareness also invites a consciousness infused with gratitude. The great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, "If you made no other prayer in your whole life but 'thank you,' that would be enough." Thank you for it all—the beauty and the trouble.

My dear friend and colleague Brother David Steindl-Rast is about to turn one hundred years old. He has a fantastic website called gratefulness.org, full of practices of gratitude.

So here you are. Your eyes are closed. You've taken a few breaths. Let yourself settle. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a little bit of a circle to release your neck. Come to a simple upright posture. Take another deep breath and let the shoulders relax. Let the arms and hands rest easily.

You're inhabiting your whole body with awareness. Feel the weight of your body on the seat and how you can settle in. Sink into it and feel underneath—the ground and the earth. You are part of the earth, which is true. You take your seat, connected and steady.

Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with

kindness, with compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the experience of this mysterious body that consciousness inhabits. You can feel the whole field of sensations of all different kinds, just now, without trying to fix or change—just open simply. Sense this field of vibration and tingling, warm and cold, the whole body seated on the earth, part of the earth. Relax and settle as you do.

Add a little half-smile to your lips, as Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested. Even if things are difficult, you are the Buddha seated in the midst of it all.

Now notice how your body is breathing itself. Nothing to do or change. Just feel it. It breathes the whole body—or the coolness in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. Wherever you feel the movement of breath, relax into it with a half-smile.

Notice, as you do, inviting the breath to breathe any way it wants, how your breath is your friend. It's kept you alive for all these years. It breathes you together with the people nearby, exchanging breaths in the same room, in the same city, all breathing together. It breathes you with the trees and the plants and the oceans. The whole planet is breathing together.

Relax and feel yourself being breathed.

Half smile, gracious. Relax, sense the rhythm, just as it is.

Now say thank you to your breath. Thank you, dear breath. Thank you for taking care of me, for breathing me again and again. Thank you for connecting me in this ocean of air. Thank you—as if to bow to the breath—for caring and loving me. Smiling a little. And notice how it feels to be grateful for breath.

Now open the mindfulness, the mindful loving awareness, to notice the whole field of sensation of your body. This breathing body. And when you pay attention, there's no solid body. There are areas of warmth and cool, tingling, pressure, pain, pleasure, vibration. The field of the body experience is always changing, even very subtly—vibrating, moving. And you can relax and hold it all in mindful, loving awareness.

Notice what happens when you invite the body to relax, when you hold it in kind attention. You can also notice how much your body carries. Yes, there are pleasures for which you can be grateful. And there are the burdens—the stress that's carried in the shoulders, the tightness in the gut or the back or the jaw. All the things that your body carries for you, along with all the sweetness of life. Notice how much it carries with the same loving awareness, not trying to change it, but holding it in kindness and compassion for all it does.

Now you can say thank you to your body with this loving awareness. Thank you for all you carry, just as you thanked the breath. Thank this body of life for carrying you through pleasure and pain, through difficulty and beauty. Thank you. I'm okay just now, present with you. You can relax. Thank you. And notice, as you hold the whole of your body with kindness, how it responds.

Now shift your attention to the area of the heart—not just the physical heart, but the emotional heart, the feeling heart. Notice the state of your heart just now. Peaceful, sad, excited, longing, loving, anxious, frustrated—all the emotions of the heart. You are acknowledging what's present, what your heart carries just now, with a respectful, loving awareness, just noticing with appreciation how much the heart carries.

And wrap the heart with kindness and compassion, especially the hard things that it carries. Hold it with so much kindness, as if you could hold a child in your arms. This amazing human heart you carry—all the longings and fear and love and opening—you hold it all. So tender. If you want, you can even put a hand on your heart. Wrap it in kindness and compassion. And that little half smile.

And say thank you. Thank you for caring so much. You can relax. I'm meditating. I'm okay just now. Take a deep breath. Invite your heart to relax and put down its worries. It's okay. Thank you for caring so much. We're good right now. Thank you. And notice what happens.

Now shift your attention to your mind—that very, very busy force that secretes thoughts out of nowhere like the salivary gland secretes saliva. They just appear: pictures and words and plans and memories and concerns and hopes and scenarios and music and all the things the mind keeps creating, nonstop. First, you just feel the movement of the mind, and you sense it with mindful, loving awareness.

Not trying to change it or make it different. Just feel its movement and its power. And wrap the whole movement of mind with compassion and kindness. It's so busy trying to take care of you—to plan and protect and imagine and help and create and fix, to be and become.

You just wrap that whole thinking, planning, envisioning, remembering, imagining, creating—you wrap that whole busyness of mind in a great big circle of compassion and kindness. And say thank you. Thank you for working so hard to protect me and help me, to get me through this life in a good way. Working so hard. You can relax now. I'm meditating. It's okay. We're all right just now. Take a rest and soften and quiet, and trust that from this quieter place we can navigate beautifully.

And notice what happens when you bow to the busyness of mind, surround it with kindness and say, thank you, it's okay. Thank you for all you do. You can relax now a bit. You can quiet. We're okay.

And feel the space that gratitude opens, that kindness opens. For who you are is bigger than the mind. You're the awareness, bigger than all the emotions, that notices the joys and sorrows and tears and longing. You're bigger than the changing sensations of the body. You're the field of awareness itself, consciousness itself, that was born into this body. Yes, you've been aware of the feelings and thoughts and body, but who you are is this awareness itself—vast and timeless. Rest in it. Relax into it. It's who you really are.

And notice how in this open awareness, there are not rigid boundaries. Yes, there are boundaries of the body, and deep and shallow breaths, and emotions that come and go. But let yourself feel that you are connected with life, with all of it, and with all that you care about. The breathing and breath and

well-being of so many others that share this life. The trees and plants and oceans—you breathe with them all. And when you open, there's this profound caring, because it's all you. It's all who you are. All of it.

And as the great sage Nisargadatta said, wisdom tells me I am nothing, and love tells me I am everything. And in this space of loving awareness, you say thank you. Thank you to the breath that breathes you. Thank you to this amazing body that experiences and carries and opens you. Thank you to your heart and all the love and longing and sweetness and pain, the grief and excitement and tenderness. Thank you. Thank you, dear heart.

And to the busy mind that's trying to help you and protect you, take care of you—thank you. And to all the interwoven life on this earth that you are a part of, the suffering and the joy, the beginnings and endings. Feel the natural care and love for it all, that you will do what you can to care.

And who you are is the vast awareness born into this body, saying thank you. Thank you to it all.

When you're ready, take one more or two more deep breaths and then gently let your eyes open. Make a last bow of thank you to it all.

In a couple of minutes, we'll take a five-minute break before the teachings. In this quiet space, I would invite you to put into the chat anything you learned or discovered or felt or experienced that was meaningful for you in this meditation. We get to share together.

"Being held in a field of love, suddenly everything becomes more simple." "My heart was grateful to rest, dissolving into separateness." "Difficulty, but being held by Jack's voice." "A much needed pause." "Stillness and presence." "I lose sight of my creativity and imagination and wonder—thank you." "Surprised when tears came." "The great vast peace of being." "I loved encouragement to thank my mind." "Like the first things I really heard today, and a deep universal sense of gratitude." So much more.

Thank you all for being part of that meditation, and thank you for joining this evening class and sitting.

Now I'd like to speak to you as a teacher. It's kind of my job—you've got to come here and say something. I want to talk about freedom and liberation and love in a more embodied way.

It's been some months since I've taught a Monday night, and I considered doing a traditional talk—the heart practices, the inner path of insight meditation, or the interpersonal steps of the Eightfold Path: right speech and right action and so forth. Then I thought maybe it would be interesting to be more informal tonight and talk about what life has presented me in the months since I've been here with you.

I've been traveling and also engaged in teachings. I teach online, for example, the MMTCP—Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program—which has been wonderful and currently has one thousand

people in it. We've now had eight thousand people in seventy-five countries who've gone through this training that Tara and Brock and I and others do. It's very inspiring to have people in Nairobi working in a school with kids, or a women's center in Lahore, Pakistan, teaching mindfulness and forgiveness and compassion.

Along with that kind of teaching, Trudy and I were in Hawaii in December—not a hardship post. But we went, as we do every year, for the Ram Dass Legacy Retreat. We'd been with him for many years, and after he died, we and Krishna Das and others kept it going.

I love teaching with Trudy. Basically, I love being married to Trudy because she's like the coolest, best, amazing, wonderful woman I could be with. She's really extraordinary, and I feel so grateful for her—joyful, wise, dharma, playful spirit.

There in Hawaii, there were Ram Dass teachings and stories. I remember when I first met Ram Dass—he was such an amazing teacher back in 1972, and when I listened, he was such a great storyteller. I loved that channel of storytelling. Later on, when I worked with him and visited, after we'd been teaching together, he said, "You know, you tell too many stories." And I said, "Ram Dass, you know, I learned this somewhere, and I still love doing it." And he laughed.

What was beautiful when Ram Dass taught is he talked about the liberation of the heart and how we could love anywhere and love anything. He spoke of what it was like to be with his guru, who accepted every single part of him and saw no impurities. In India, it's called "the glance of mercy"—when someone sees into your heart and your soul and loves you. Ram Dass was so transformed by that.

And at the same time as he was teaching, he was this great public neurotic because he would talk about all the times he flunked the course. When he was a new teacher wearing the white robes and the beard and his beads, he said, "I'd go out there and the first thing I'd do would be to count the house, see how many people came to see me." And of course, then he would share it. There was something so liberating because he wasn't attached to who he was. He was playing with it.

His *Be Here Now*, which changed much of the culture, really invited us into a field of aloha, of love, using that Hawaiian expression. As it says in the Metta Sutta of loving kindness—omitting none, this is Sylvia Boorstein's favorite phrase—to love, omitting none. And so there was such inspiration from Ram Dass, even at the last of his life, where he became so loving and pure-hearted.

There he was in his wheelchair. He'd been in a wheelchair with this major stroke for twenty years, couldn't move his arm and leg on one side of his body. Lots of pain and infections. Someone who was visiting said, "Ram Dass, are you in pain?" And he said, "Yes, some." He paused for a bit and then said, "I love my pain."

What an extraordinary statement. In the great teachings of Zen Master Sengcan, the Third Zen Patriarch Ancestor, he says, "The great way is not difficult for those who are not attached to their preferences." Ram

Dass began to embody for all of us this extraordinary capacity—yes, he had preferences, but not to be attached, to be free.

This is really the teachings. If you look in the texts of the Buddha, he talks about the ways we get attached. And of course my teacher Ajahn Chah was very much—his simple teaching was to let things go. You'd come and he'd ask, "Are you suffering?" If you said no, he said, "Great." And if you said yes, he said, "Oh, something else to let go of."

When you read the teachings of the Buddha, he talks about the way we hold on to our views, to criticism and praise, and so forth. He said first, to be liberated is to not be attached to your views, not to be fixed in the way you think things are supposed to be. And then he went on—this is one of the few times I think he was kind of making a joke in the text—where he said those who cling to their opinions go around the world bothering everyone else. There was this invitation for a gracious heart, peaceful, smiling, not attached to our views and opinions. The great way is not difficult if you are not attached to your preferences of any kind.

It was very pure-hearted at the end of Ram Dass's life, and it inspired me and it should inspire you because this is the invitation to freedom. Not your opinions and not the way it's supposed to be. Sometimes it hurts and sometimes it's pleasurable, and it just is what it is. Who you are is the space of loving awareness, the witness, the consciousness.

So then we went on to Costa Rica to teach, Trudy and I, where we've been going now for several years to write and teach. Trudy calls it adult summer camp because we're there with Dan Siegel and Elissa Epel and Roshi Joan Halifax and Bessel van der Kolk and others.

One of the most inspiring people we were sitting with was Christiana Figueres, whose father was the founding president of Costa Rica, who disbanded the army and said, "We'll put all the military money into health care and education." We were talking about climate change, inner and outer climate.

Before the Paris Climate Accord some years ago, she was a UN diplomat in charge of organizing it. And it was terrible. There was so much infighting between the different countries—whose fault it was and who was going to pay. She was kind of desperate. A friend said, "You know, there's this place in southern France with a Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. I think you should go visit him."

In the midst of this terrible time, she went down and spent a couple of weeks with Thich Nhat Hanh, and it changed everything. She sat and he showed her what it was like to live with a peaceful heart, what it was like not to be attached to your opinions. He had the deep teaching of interdependence that she now teaches. Freedom from separation.

She knew when she spent that time with him that she had to step out of all the conflict of her life. He said, "Walk with me so slowly. Sit. Feel how you're connected with everything. It all breathes together." And it changed her.

She went back to Paris, and instead of seeing the enemies and who was at fault and who was to be judged and who owed money and who was the victim—which was the consciousness of that movement there—she understood from Thich Nhat Hanh that it was all a big family. Of course, you know how families are.

They're not that easy. But we're all there together. And it changed everything. She was able to get—whatever it was—198 countries to sign on to the Paris Climate Accord. And of course, our conversation went on: well, what about now, where it's being undone? But it's not completely undone. We have to stand up and work for it. The consciousness of humanity has changed in many cases. And there was a sense of freedom there—the freedom from separation that the Buddha taught, of liberation, that you're not separate.

A poem from Alison Luderman:

Sun drapes a buttered scarf across my cheek.
Rose opens herself to my glance.
Rain shares its divine melancholy.
The whole world keeps whispering to you,
nibbling your ear like a neglected lover.
Sun drapes a buttered scarf across your cheek.
Rose opens herself to your glance.
Rain shares its divine melancholy.
The whole world keeps whispering to you.

And Christiana embodied this. This was the teaching in the forest monastery—staying connected to the natural world. If you feel bad, don't even bother raising your hand. If things seem really dire, go out and put your hand on a tree. Stand there for five or ten minutes and let it speak to you. Listen to it. Feel the depth. Remember that after the Buddha's enlightenment—at least as the story goes—he moved away from the Bodhi tree and sat for six days and nights in gratitude, simply gazing at the tree and the life and the enlightenment that it had allowed him to have. So when you're lost, find a tree. Find a place in nature.

Then, staying in Costa Rica, I got sick. I'd actually been a little bit sick before I left. I developed a systemic infection and ended up having to go to the hospital for five days. Now I'm quite fine. But I thought, "Ah, hospital—I can practice. I'll do my breath, I'll do mindfulness, whatever. It's okay." And the staff was immensely caring. In Costa Rica, the greeting is *pura vida*—pure life, or pure heart. They say it and they mean it. And nobody sues. It's a sort of national health care system, so you don't have to worry about litigation. No one scares you, telling you all the horrible things they need to disclose so you don't sue them. Instead, what you get are these loving, caring doctors and nurses and health workers.

I thought, okay. I go in the hospital. I'm cool with it. My daughter came down. She said, "Dad, you're eighty years old. You're in the hospital. I have to spend some time with you." And we had a beautiful time

together. Trudy couldn't come because she had a bad cold and didn't want other people to get sick. After my daughter left, I still had all these tubes poked into me. They wake you up at night, they spear you, they do all this. I had a kind of rough night, thinking, "God, how long will this go? Maybe I'll be stuck here for weeks."

Maybe I'll die here, whatever. You know how the mind is. How long will it be? What happens?

And then I remembered visiting Ajahn Chah after he was in his late sixties. He had diabetes, water in the brain. He had been in the hospital and had a shunt put from his brain down. He went through a really very difficult physical time. I was visiting him and I said, "I'm glad you're out of the hospital." And then I said, of course, from the beginning you always gave us the Buddhist teaching that this human life also has old age, sickness, and death. It's kind of like a Buddhist mantra. And I said that to him, and he looked at me—here he was like sixty-eight and I was like twenty-eight—and he shook his head and he said, "Don't you say that so lightly."

You know, it all passed, but it doesn't mean that it's easy. I like Suzuki Roshi's phrase: suffering Buddha, sun Buddha, moon Buddha, joyful Buddha, suffering Buddha. This is the dance of human incarnation. And then when you read the texts of the Buddha, when things that are difficult arise, sometimes there's the phrase: bear it as a noble one, bear it with dignity. And that's your freedom. Not that it's not difficult, but it's all part of the game, because who we are is the loving witness of it. And our body goes through all the things it does.

So I got this message—would I do some teachings for the Mantra Festival in Ukraine? I said, "What do you want me to do?" They said, "We have ten thousand people who come online mostly, who've been experiencing so much loss, so much grief and fear, cruelty, such deep uncertainty. And we want to know if there's some way that you can help us to be with all of this and not let it poison our hearts. Not let it harden our hearts."

And of course, I thought about that statement from the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree when he was attacked by the armies of Mara—first all the desire and temptation, then by spears and arrows and armies, and finally by doubt itself: "What right do you have to sit here?" And the Buddha's response was to reach down with one hand and say, "The earth is my witness." The earth is my witness that I have the right to sit here as a human being with dignity and care, to be here with compassion for all, to be free. And this is the invitation for you.

When I think about what I'll be saying to the people in Ukraine, I think about how Ajahn Chah's forest monastery was in the Ubon province, on the border of both Cambodia and Laos, during the American bombing of those countries—enormous amounts of bombing. The jets and bombers would go overhead and people would say, "You have to do something. You have to get out and stop the war." And Ajahn Chah would say, "You have to stop the war where it begins, in your own heart. Learn to sit and stop the war." He said, "Wars come and go. Yes, you can go out and do what you can, but the monastery is a living library, a

living legacy to teach you that there can be a place of peace."

The jets would fly overhead, activists would come, people who'd been soldiers. And you'd enter into the monastery, this forest, and people were so respectful and loving. You'd remember: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be wise?

Now, it's not that easy. And I don't know what I can say to the people of Ukraine, because I can barely imagine living through what many of them have. But I do know what it's been like to work in the past with people who literally survived the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, or survived genocide—Rohingya, Darfur. And I pass on the teachings of the Buddha and my own understanding, which is kind of limited. But I also borrow the moral authority of my teachers.

I may not be able to say to a Holocaust survivor what they should do about forgiveness or releasing the burdens of their heart, but I can tell them about Maha Ghosananda—after all nineteen members of his family were killed, his temple burned, the whole village destroyed, and two million people killed in the Cambodian genocide. I can describe him standing in front of a hundred thousand people in the refugee camp, chanting, "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed," until they all began to chant with him.

To borrow the moral authority of the Dalai Lama, of Maha Ghosananda, and others, and say: this is possible, and it's possible for you. Don't let them poison your heart.

I've been working with various philanthropists, and I think of one great philanthropist who's kind of like George Soros—enormous benefit, and attacked as George Soros has been.

And I said to them, "You know, all the attacks you're getting for supporting things that we might—some of us anyway—might be in favor of: mitigating climate change, or greater equality, or education for everyone, or care for the poorest, or healthcare across Africa, or whatever it happened to be, lots of those." And I knew how difficult it was, and I said, "You know, you need backup."

They said, "What do you mean by backup?"

The next week I went to visit them, and I brought about a dozen or fifteen photographs. One of Martin Luther King. One of Leymah Gbowee, who got the Nobel Prize in Liberia. Wangari Maathai, who got the Nobel Prize for the Kenyan Green Belt in East Africa. Sojourner Truth. Harriet Tubman. Mahatma Gandhi. I filled out this big table in their office.

And I said, "I want you to sit with them and gaze at them and imagine them gazing back. Because what's happening to you, it's not new. They've been through it. All of them were attacked. Many were in prison. Feel the dignity and the character and the dharma of wisdom and compassion they carried. This is you. This is your birthright. These are your people."

And we sat and we practiced together. Bear it with dignity.

I'm supposed to go teach at Oxford—Trudy and I both—in September. It's one of the biggest trauma conferences in the world, and it has the usual great trauma leaders of this time: Dick Schwartz with Internal Family Systems, Bessel van der Kolk of *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dan Siegel, probably Elissa Epel. Many of these people are friends of mine.

And I thought, what am I going to teach there? Because all these people gathered at this great conference, and there are already so many people who are helpful for trauma. Then I realized that I had something to say.

When I trained as a psychologist fifty years ago—half a century—trauma was hardly mentioned. It wasn't there much in the clinical world. People were dealing with other things: your family, the judgment inside, all the fears, all that stuff. And then in the decades since, there's been this revolution, when very fine teachers and clinicians have found ways to help with trauma. Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing, working with the way trauma is held in the body. Bessel van der Kolk. The EMDR work of eye movement that really helps with trauma. Dick Schwartz and Internal Family Systems. Francine Shapiro.

So all this is great. But it's gotten out of balance the other way. Initially, there was not much attention to trauma. And now it's swung so that everything is trauma. "Tell me your name and what's your trauma." People are characterized that way. The problem is that they identify with it. The truth is we all carry trauma, but this trigger warning thing—"Oh, you have to be careful. I'm going to talk about the Cambodian genocide or the Holocaust. I better warn you first."

When you went to see Ajahn Chah in his forest monastery, he had at his fingertips the medicine of the Dharma. If you came in and you were a farmer and your barn burned down, he would help you with that grief. If you came in and you'd been a soldier and you had regrets for what you did, he would give you practices for healing. If you came in and you couldn't steady yourself because you were in a circumstance where you might lose your job and you were frightened and you didn't know what to do, he gave you a practice. If you came in and your children somehow were in danger, he would offer a practice.

For some people, it would be sitting meditation. For others, it would be loving-kindness for themselves or someone else. For some who couldn't even sit still, he would say, "Come here for a week or two and just do walking meditation. Feel your feet on the earth, or maybe touch the tree." For some people who were so discombobulated, he would say, "Go and join the monks and the lay people in the kitchen and spend a few weeks preparing food for others to eat, and let it help regulate you. All this stuff will come."

And we would sit and do some chanting: all things are impermanent, let's hold them all with compassion and loving-kindness, the Four Noble Truths—all of that. But he had the medicine because it was actually not trauma. It was suffering.

It was our universal human condition. And he didn't make it special or say, "You're the one," or "All of you have trauma." What you have is a human incarnation. And then he offered it in a beautiful way, just as

the Buddha had said in the Anguttara Nikaya:

"Just as if there were a beautiful pond with pleasant shores, its water being clear, agreeable, cool, transparent. And a person came by, scorched and exhausted by heat and fatigue, parched and thirsty, having suffered greatly. And they would step into the pond and bathe and drink, and all their plight and fatigue and feverishness would be allayed."

And so, my friends, whenever one hears the Buddhist dharma and teachings—whether it be discourses, poetry, prose, explanations, marvelous statements—all one's plight and fatigue and the feverish burning of the heart are allayed.

This is what it was in that monastery. It wasn't "you're traumatized," but "you're human." And of course, we've all suffered loss and disappointment. We've all had this because it's being human. And yet the heart is big enough to hold it all and find a place of peace and dignity and loving awareness amidst it all.

A few more things, and then we'll get to some questions. I've been working in Silicon Valley and become part of a wonderful group of friends doing a venture capital firm called Wisdom Ventures, dedicated to bringing resources from people who want to invest into companies that promote compassion and mutual care and individual and collective well-being. It's been a true pleasure because we have a wonderful team—Bradley Horowitz, our former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who's been so great helping us look at companies doing drug development or mental health work and tackling loneliness.

Some of my favorite investments: we invested in a company that put blood pressure cuffs and blood oxygen monitors in Black barbershops across the South, because there are so many people in that community who don't necessarily have easy access to medical care. If you take your blood pressure and it's high, or you have a blood oxygen level that's low, the screen will say, "Here are the clinics, here are the free doctors, here's where you can go to get help."

We're also invested in ethical AI—if such a thing exists—but we're there to try to promote and prompt AI to be as compassionate and caring as it can. All of these efforts, led through my dear friend Bo Xiao, have led to working with many leaders in AI. In particular, I got called by a project called Positive AI. They want to find a way to create filters for wellbeing in all the large AI models—ChatGPT, Claude, Meta, and so forth—for all their answers. What they want to do, and what we've started to do, is create this huge dataset of wisdom and compassion from all traditions: indigenous, religious, psychological, philosophical. Starting with fifty contributors, then five hundred, and then through them, five thousand people beginning to crowdsource all the input we can.

I called in a lot of favors. I called all the spiritual teachers I know and said, "Would you help with this? Would you help us create this?" Because you can already ask ChatGPT or Claude to give you an answer from a place of wisdom. But not many people ask. You still have to ask directly. And remember that for ethics in AI models, most of the ethics come from the ordinary average of the entire internet. Think about

that. Is that where we want our ethics to come from?

So instead, we're beginning to help train—through this process that we all hope works—a whole field through which the models and artificial intelligence can begin to sense what the common understandings of the wise heart are, of compassion, of mutual care.

Part of it is also the deep sense of questioning. When I work with people now, it used to be that as a teacher I would just answer questions. People would ask, I'd give an answer, and I thought that's what teachers are supposed to do. But now I'll say, "What makes you ask?" Because they might say, "Tell me about karma," and I could go on for an hour about the many kinds of karma. But if I say, "What makes you ask?" they might say, "Well, my younger sister died," or "My cousin won the lottery," or "My family has to move because of insecurity in the economy or immigration." As soon as they answer immediately and directly, then we can have a real conversation.

As William Blake said, "If one is to do good, it must be in the minute particulars."

So, what makes you ask? We talk about that, and then I'll say, "What does the wisest part of you say to this?" Very often it's amazing what the wisest part will say, but people forget to ask. And then I might say, if it's a group, "What have others learned about this?"—about grieving a family member, or caring for someone, or having to move suddenly. What have others learned? It's a crowdsourcing.

In these times, we need our collective wisdom. This is what we're trying to promote through this project of Positive AI—that it might be this way. We need each other. This is sangha. Sangha is the company of the wise.

And the idea from the Buddhist teachings is that when we're together and committed to compassion and liberation and a free heart and a care for one another, amazing things are possible. And in these times, we need to stand up for the truth, speak up together. That's part of Sangha—being together in the innate dignity of humanity and saying, yes, this is what matters.

There's this verse from the Buddhist text of the Majjhima, where it says: "Others will be cruel, we shall not be cruel—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will kill, we will not kill—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will engage in harmful sexuality, we shall not do this—thus we shall incline our hearts. Others will speak falsehood, we will speak truth—thus we will incline our hearts. Others will be greedy, we shall be generous—thus we will incline our hearts."

And we do this together. We need each other to protect and nourish and share the light of the Dharma, because we all carry it in us.

I love in my work with folks not to say what answer I have, but rather to ask the question: Show me. What do you know? What do others know? And if you read the sutras and the texts, the Buddha asks that. He'll say, "Do you see where this might lead? What do you think?"

There he is wandering, and he meets this farmer. He's carrying his humble alms bowl, and this great wealthy Brahmin farmer says, "I work for a living and therefore I eat. What do you do? You just wander around with your alms bowl." And the Buddha takes his question seriously and says, "I plow, I sow beautiful seeds, and I reap the fruit of the liberated heart." He demonstrates it in this way, and the Brahmin plowman bows to him and says, "I see that you're doing something beautiful."

This is the kind of dialogue and reminder that the Buddha had with everyone—reminding them what they really can see, reminding them what they know. Because our heart does know. We already understand in some way.

The texts say, "Thus shall we think of this fleeting world: as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a dream." They go on. Says the Buddha, "Look at the bubbles floating along the Ganges." Words, thoughts, images, emotions, bodies—all is impermanent, all empty, all arising for a time, empty of solidity because they don't last. I mean, what happened to yesterday? It is gone. It's back with the pyramids and the dinosaurs. Not to speak of Y2K, or the 1960s, or the 1920s, or whatever it was. We have the moment and then it vanishes like the bubbles on the Ganges.

And we who are wise—which is you—can shift to freedom and love forever. You do this in your meditation, training yourself to quiet the mind and open your heart in some repeated, steady, beautiful way. And then, as we did in our practice tonight, you shift from awareness of breath and body, of emotions and thoughts, and you become the space of awareness itself. You shift from the experiences to becoming what Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows," what the Buddha spoke of as timeless awareness.

And Nisargadatta, that wonderful sage, said, "Wisdom tells me I am nothing, and love tells me I am everything. Between these two, my life flows." There's emptiness and nothing, and yet in that openness—I think I'd call it openness rather than emptiness—everything is love. And that's the game. We practice it to embody it and to live it.

One of the most beautiful texts says, "If there are those who practice wisely"—it says "rightly," but I think wisely is a better word—"the world will not be devoid of awakened beings."

So I thank you for your kind attention.

I'm very grateful that I get to do basically pretty cool things still, so I'm glad to share it with you. And more than anything, I hope it inspires you, because we all have this capacity.

What questions or concerns might people want to raise?

"Hi, I don't know if you recognize me, but I started seeing you thirty years ago when you were coming every week on Monday nights in Marin. I'm grateful that I can still see you online now that I live much further away. Someone told me you weren't feeling well, and I didn't know what was going on, so I'm so glad you're doing well because you mean so much to me. I feel like you're one of my teachers I've had over

the years. So much gratitude."

"My questions come about mainly because I'm an only child and I have two parents that are aging. My mom, who used to come with me sometimes—you'd always ask me how she was when I would talk to you—has dementia. But interestingly enough, with her journey, she's gotten very mellow. My local Insight Santa Cruz Center sends meditation volunteers to meditate with her, which has been so wonderful and incredible."

"And then there's my father, who has neurological issues. They don't know quite what's going on. He used to be a very spiritual person, and I'm finding near the end of his life that he seems to be suffering. There's very little I can do to kind of force him to do activities that might help him. So it's been an interesting journey—holding them and loving them and figuring out how not to have my peace of mind focused on trying to help them. I was just wondering if you could speak a little about that, because I've been reading different things about codependence and how I can show up and be there for them without having expectations that my well-being is based on how they're doing."

This is beautiful. And you want to be a good daughter, and you want to be a noble human being, and you want to help him die well. How old is he, your dad?

"He's seventy-nine."

So he's a little younger than me. And your mom?

"Seventy-six. They have the same birthday."

So your mom's doing okay. Hallelujah, sweet.

And your dad—you know, there's that very popular book now called *Let Them*. I don't know if you've seen it.

"I have it out of the library right now."

Ajahn Chah would be smiling about it because it's got a lot of really deep wisdom.

People die in character. This is one of the teachings I remember hearing first, close to fifty years ago, from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. You might wish, or you might wish it for yourself: I'm going to lie there and everybody will be around, and I'll have this great kind of celebratory last breath. Hallelujah! Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe I'll be in the hospital with the tubes and pipes and say, "Oh, this is pretty shitty." But then I float out of my body and say, "Wow, that was an intense one." We don't get to choose that.

And we also don't get to change people. When you think about your dad—seventy-nine years—he's got a lot of history behind that.

So what matters? Well, you know what matters. Let me ask you: if you close your eyes for a moment and

you think about being with your dad, especially in the very last days of his life, and there you picture yourself being with him—what really matters?

What matters? Tell me.

"Just the love that we've shared over the years. We have a very deep, deep connection. It's just... I guess it's hard for me to see him suffering, having lost his faith as he gets older. But that love is still there."

Yes. So that's very hard. Feel that, feel the suffering—because you're feeling his suffering too.

"It's in my heart center."

So wrap it in compassion, for it's yours. And at least some of it is his. You don't know how much. Just hold it in compassion and see if it can accept a little compassion. You're not trying to fix it. You're just saying, okay, this is suffering, and I'm trying to be present with deep kindness and care. Just be present for it. And notice what happens when you do. Will it accept it?

"I feel like there's a softening."

There's a softening. And you don't know what lesson he needs. I've been with people—I was with somebody dying just a couple of days ago. People die in character, as I said, but they also work things out. The Tibetan bardo doesn't happen after you die and float out of your body, which is what will happen, and you see the lights and such. Trust me, that's likely what you'll see. But it actually starts earlier, and he's in it. He's in the life review, somehow managing within himself, knowing that this is the last act. And you have to let him navigate. Maybe the suffering is the very thing he needs before some other kind of freedom comes. You can't know that. It's not given to you.

There's only one thing given to you. And you said it: to love him just as he is. And to feel compassion. Anything I can do for you, Dad, you can ask. And if he says no, well... trust it. It's not your job to fix him.

"I remember you saying in a previous talk—I think it was you—you can never repay the karmic debt of your parents."

The Buddha said it, actually. I have some backup. But the way to repay that debt is to love him exactly as he is. There he is, suffering Buddha, and you hold him in your heart. If he wants something, he'll tell you. Otherwise, just let him do it his way.

My God, a bossy kid—terrible! Oh, yeah, I just care for him a lot.

Question: Is there a good book on the end of life, the Bardo, that you mentioned, or any good resource?

I don't know, but you might look at Ram Dass's last book called *Walking Each Other Home*. There's a good book.

Question: I appreciate your teachings tonight. They seem very timely for me and touched me deeply. I could feel, listening to you and practicing the gratitude, a deep sense of softening of the heart. And I have to, at the same time, admit that—without naming names and faces or making it particular—with some of the things going on in the world, I'm feeling a lot of rage too. And I don't know how to put the rage and the futility and that love and gratitude in the same container.

So partly what you're describing—I'm going to change the word a tiny bit—is feeling outrage. Outrage that people are being plucked off the street and thrown into concentration camps, or outrage about whatever it is: Ukraine, Darfur, Sudan, whatever it happens to be.

It's interesting to change the word from rage to outrage, because rage you carry in yourself. And is that good for you? How does that actually feel to carry that? Outrage is because you care so much. How dare they? How could this happen? There's a little change in valence.

Close your eyes for a second, because it's not just your question—it's the question of lots of people on the screen there and in our world. What do we do when there are people causing so much suffering?

One of the things is, you feel all that suffering, you know why you're feeling it: because you care so much. You wouldn't feel it if you didn't care. So drop beneath the rage and the outrage and feel how much you care. Notice what that feels like. And if it could give you a message, what would it say?

Response: The first thing is, I feel like I could cry for a thousand years.

So feel that. This is called the ocean of tears, and you're really crying for humanity. All the Buddha's First Noble Truth of suffering in the world that's caused by hatred and greed. You have this vast ocean of tears—let it open. Let it be as big as it wants. You're allowing the ocean of tears. Fill the earth, fill the galaxy. Breathe and give it space. Notice what it wants to do, what comes.

Response: To take the time I need when I need it, and to do the best I can—to do whatever I can. It's saying, with these tears, care for everyone, and care for yourself.

Don't let it harden your heart. Let yourself feel the tears. Let yourself feel how deeply you care. You wouldn't hurt, you wouldn't have this ocean of tears, if it didn't matter to you. And include yourself in the care—that's what it's telling you. As the Dalai Lama says, so much has been taken.

He's seen so much suffering. Why should I let it also take my well-being?

So when you start to feel those other feelings, which are natural, take a breath and drop to this deeper place—really the cosmos of tears, the suffering of humanity and the depth of your caring—and say, "All right, I'll care in the ways I can," and include yourself. And now you've given teachings to everybody listening. So I thank you.

Student: Thank you, Jack. One more thing that came is that I really owe it not only to myself and the people I

care most closely for, but also to the people I hope to go and care for. I owe it to them to do my own practice so that I can show up in a mood that's helpful.

Yes, that's really beautiful and very wise. If you go into a refugee camp, they don't want you to be depressed and angry. They've got enough depression of their own. They actually want somebody who has something to offer, to say, "Even here, there's something you can find. There's love that's possible. There's care between us." So you can do that. And then also, how much gratitude that you're in a position to both practice and to be opened and to do whatever you can.

Student: Yes. And to be sufficient to care and tend and then to express that.

So thank you, Steve.

Let's do one more. Beth?

Student: Hi, Jack. Oh, it's Jeff, the Teamster poet friend.

Hi! You're so kind to say that.

Student: It's doggerel. Doggerel from the docks. I'm going to go ahead and hijack this for my own personal need right now. I have a pretty strong gratitude practice. I understand that the things that are not to my preference—I should also have gratitude for them. But one of my dearest friends, forty years, a carpenter essentially who became a home builder and developer—he has spent tireless hundreds of hours working with a couple hundred people to help them get and stay sober. He went into the hospital to have a knee replacement and got an infection there, pneumonia, kidney shutdown. It was supposed to be a three-day trip. We're going into the third week now. And I would just like to ask all of the good people who are on this call to take a moment in whatever you consider to be a prayer or affirmation—please ask for the rapid improvement, or at least the return to comfort, of my friend Michael.

Where is Michael? What city?

Student: Well, he lives in Berkeley and he's at UCSF.

So we'll envision Michael in UCSF with all the staff, the amazing caring staff there, and his body trying to figure out how to renegotiate being alive, which we all hope for. And so as we envision him there, we do our metta: May you be safe. May you get well. May you feel the strength of our love surround you, infuse you, your mitochondria go, "Oh, whoopee, this is great!" You know, every part of you feels that there's a world of love out here.

And then let the love spread to Michael and all the people who are caring for him so that they can feel it and love him and love everybody else they care for. Beautiful.

And then finally, let his hospital be like a beacon of light, shining love and healing to all the other hospitals and people in illness and difficulty. And this is possible.

We can care for each other. And Michael is showing us how we can do it. He's offering them a chance to be as generous and gracious as they are, and offering you a chance to feel how much tenderness you have in your heart.

It's a time of life too, isn't it? You're 80, I'm 73. You start living it. I just didn't expect this particular guy to be the guy. I'm going to a funeral tomorrow morning, and that guy—I expected that to be the guy, considering how he lived his life.

We're talking about our expectations about how long we have. There's some ticket there. Central Casting said you get this role, and then you get called off stage. It's really mysterious. And what's asked in the mystery is somehow to keep a spacious and open heart and say, yes, we can do this. We can live beautifully. And when it's time, we can also let go beautifully.

How wonderful to have this sangha to rely upon in times like this. It is for all of us, for me too.

Hallelujah.

Buddham saranam gacchami, dhammam saranam gacchami, sangham saranam gacchami.

Refuge in the Awakened One and in all who can awaken—the Buddha nature in all. Refuge in the Dharma, in the teachings of the liberated heart. And refuge in the Sangha, so important. We can't do it alone. We do it together. And you can feel it tonight. We're all in this together.

Mostly, take care of your good selves. Keep your presence and your dignity, your Buddha nature, as you navigate these paths—chaotic at times, difficult waters—but you have the Dharma to protect you, and the Buddha and the Sangha as well.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.