Identity and Freedom

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:03:37

As I was walking up the hill to come here this evening to give the talk, I could see a couple of bright planets just near the horizon. There's that sweet turning right before the sitting when we're in that liminal period between day and night, and the light becomes mysterious and magical. This beautiful valley here at Spirit Rock, which holds us, becomes a place where we can step out of the ordinary thrall and busyness of our life and listen in a deeper way.

Every wise culture in the world knows that there are times to go into the mountains or go to the ocean or go out in the desert or someplace where you can listen to your heart, listen to your body, listen to a rhythm that's bigger and deeper than the internet, and escape for a short time the madness of politics. You are so lucky. It's all happening out there, and there's no news, I want to assure you. It's all the same.

But the question when we come on retreat is not so much the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. Are we connected to something that is timeless and great, that gives us an understanding of how to live in this mysterious life we've been given? Tonight I want to continue the conversation on identity and build on what Trudy spoke of—the wood wide web and the deepening of your presence and working with the breath. I'll also speak about the great matter, as it's called in Zen.

I just came back from Dana-Farber, the wonderful cancer institute connected with Harvard Medical School, being with my twin brother who's doing a bit better, but it's still difficult, dangerous. I was surrounded by a lot of bald-headed people who weren't monks and nuns. Their families and kids and older people and middle-aged, all there together. And I started to do metta for everybody. Metta for those who are sick. Metta for those who are caring for them and their families. Metta for the nurses and the attendants and the doctors and everyone who has to attend people in this particular healing environment—or in this environment where people don't heal.

The Buddha put it this way in the Anguttara Nikaya: it seems as though 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. It's very stark there to see it. But this is actually this mysterious human life we've been given, which is finite. And then what do we do with it? How do we live in it wisely? Clearly, there are some questions that can't be answered by Google.

The question of identity is at the heart of much spiritual tradition. Kalu Rinpoche, a wonderful, great old Tibetan master, said: You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this, or you forget it. When you understand, you will see that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

Or like Nisargadatta, the sage that I studied with in Bombay, who put it differently, the same expression: Wisdom says I am nothing, love says I am everything. Between these two, my life flows.

So who are we? The Buddha spoke about liberation and offered his own experience of freedom, the liberated heart and mind, to all. He said this liberation allows you to move through the world without clinging, without grasping, without being entangled to the things in this world. And why should we learn this? The Buddha went on with these phrases: This world is like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, and a dream. It's ephemeral. Yesterday was here and it's gone. Remember Y2K? Gone. Back with the dinosaurs, back with the pyramids. Things arise, they exist, and then they're gone, like that. Yesterday, your hard day for some of you meditating—it's gone. Today, maybe hard, maybe not—gone. Here we have the present as it is, and things arise and then they dissolve like that.

Again, here is the Buddha describing this from the Samyutta Nikaya: Suppose a man or woman who was not blind beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges River as they floated along

and carefully examined them, and they would appear to him as empty, unreal, insubstantial. In exactly the same way does the meditator behold bodily phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, states of consciousness. As they arise and examining them carefully, they appear to them to be empty, insubstantial, void, without a self.

And the good news of this is not that it's a particular philosophy or something that you have to believe. This is really a science of the heart that you get to experiment with yourself. My teacher Ajahn Chah said, of course there are dozens of meditation techniques, but it all comes down to this: just let it be. Step over here where it's cool. Step out of the battle. Why not give it a try? That's his immediate description of the Buddha's freedom offered to all that he encountered.

Now the question is, hearing these lovely teachings, how do we do it?

When Ajahn Chah had practiced for the first eight or nine years in the forest, he got some instruction from teachers who lived in caves and out in the jungle with the tigers and all the wildness of the tradition of the forest monks. He had visions and insights and samadhi states. Then he went to see the greatest master of the time, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun. After paying his respects, he described all of his meditation. He said, "I had this insight, my body dissolved into light, I had this vision and these states and understanding."

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Chah, you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. Experiences just arise and pass. They're like movies—a romantic movie, a comedy, a war movie, a documentary. You've all seen a lot of movies, haven't you?" He said, "Those are the movies. But the only way that you will really understand is to turn your attention from the screen, from the contents of thoughts and feelings and the movies and the states, back to the one who knows, back to the knowing

itself, which is consciousness. Turn your attention back and become the witnessing, become the one who knows the experience rather than being lost or caught in each experience that arises and passes."

Now you already understand this in some deep way, because what I want to talk about tonight is in fact your own birthright, your own true nature. You understand it in the most simple way when you go and look in the mirror and notice you've aged. Face it—fur is getting lost in some parts and growing in other parts. As Wes says, the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. It wrinkles and it sags and it spots and it does all that stuff. You notice you've aged. But the weird thing is, you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? It's quite common.

That's because in the moment of looking in the mirror, you see the body, which ages from being an infant to a toddler to a child, adolescent to young adult and up through middle age and old age. The body exists in time. It grows like a plant and then it fades and dies. But the consciousness that sees, that observes—that's outside of time. And so in that moment, it's like you're looking at your body and saying, "Hmm, aged, hasn't it? How interesting." As if you're looking at your human incarnation and saying, "Oh, where are we now? Let's see, three quarters of the way through, maybe if I'm lucky." Something like that. How's it going in your incarnation?

And the gift is that you're not so identified with this body and mind as the Buddha described—the thoughts and perceptions and feelings.

Here's a poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Yo no soy yo.* I am not I. I'm this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk. The one who forgives sweet when I hate. The one who takes a walk when I am indoors. The one who will remain standing when I die.

He's really talking about a timeless spirit or consciousness that was born into your body.

I mean, who do you think you are? The lentils and beet soup that you had—that's what you are? Come on. Who are you really?

And when you don't identify or grasp, there comes a happiness, a joy, a lightness, and an ease. You can move through the world, but in a different way—in a liberated way.

This shift of identity is described in the first teachings of the Buddha, in the turning of the wheel, where he describes the noble truth: there is suffering. Anybody not have that, by the way? Okay, you could have your money back, but apparently... There's cause to suffering—greed, hatred, attachment, confusion. And there's an end of suffering. There's a path to the end of suffering, sometimes called the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought or right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

The path is summed up—this beautiful path to the end of suffering—sometimes as *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*:

virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Or sometimes it's summed up as *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*: generosity, virtue, and mental cultivation. But it all describes a way to live in the world—not to remove yourself from the world, because you can't—but to live in the world without being caught by it.

This means you have to hold two realities at the same time. You have to remember your Buddha nature and your social security number and zip code. You have to hold the paradox in that way. And the Buddha begins: O nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember that your true nature is liberation itself. And then each of these trainings is a way to shift identity from being caught in a small sense of self to being free.

Dāna, which means generosity, the first of those qualities—when you become generous, what happens is that you shift your identity from mine and me and grasping, from the small sense of self, and you expand who you are to share with others. It's a really beautiful thing to be able to do this. It's actually a shift of the sense of being separate to being engaged and connected with something much larger.

As Ram Dass used to say, you're just an accountant in the firm anyway. You don't own this stuff. It's like this very wealthy man who died, and somebody was saying, "Gosh, how much did he leave?" And the other person said, "Well, everything, of course." That's how much you leave.

Sharon Salzberg was describing walking along the street in Seattle when a somewhat disheveled homeless person came up to her looking for money, gazed at her, and pleaded, "Don't you know me?" She said it just stopped her in her tracks. First she went through the normal files—do I know this person? Did they come to a retreat with me? Because it could have been. But then she realized that wasn't it. It was a deeper question. Don't you know me? I'm one of you. I'm part of you. Can you help me? Can we share together?

When you go to traditional Buddhist societies in Thailand, Burma, India, and places in East Asia and China, there is so much generosity connected with Buddhist practice. It's really beautiful. There's tentative giving, they describe, and then brotherly or sisterly giving—don't you know me, here, share with this. And then there's royal giving, in which you feel, as Rumi writes, "Walking out of the treasury, I feel generous. On a spring day, how can you not give things away?"

I remember being in very poor villages fifty years ago as a monk during the dry season, not a lot of food. People would come out and they would be so devoted in offering it. It was as if they were saying, "We so value what you represent—the spirit of freedom that you represent as a monk—that we'll give of the little food we have because you buoy up our spirit." It was just the most beautiful thing, to have people take the preciousness of what they had and say, won't you share this too?

Do you know anybody who's generous who isn't happy? Really generous, where that doesn't make happiness? There's a way in which generosity invites your nobility, your Buddha nature you could call it, your true nature, to shift from the small self to say, "It's us." It's what Trudy talked about last night in the description of the trees—how they were, through their roots, feeding not only their babies but sick trees.

The trees were taking care of one another.

And that beauty... Larry Brilliant, who's a friend and was one of the people in the WHO who helped to eradicate smallpox—which is an astonishing thing, by the way, because 500 million people died of smallpox in the 20th century. It's hard to believe it was the number one, or one of the number one killers, and terrible deaths. And it's been eradicated.

He said in the last villages that they went to, in these remote villages in Asia, the people didn't want to be inoculated. They believed that smallpox was brought on by the gods for some reason, and you couldn't stop it. So they had to forcibly inoculate the last villages. He said, "We went to this last village, forcibly inoculated the people. They resisted. The village headman, as soon as they were all inoculated, said, 'Bring out the food. These people are our guests.'" And they picked what they had, the little bit they had in their garden, and they made a feast. Because even if you did, he said, what we believe the gods told us you should not do, and you were listening to some other gods, you are still the guests in our village. Imagine that.

So generosity means shifting your identity to something greater. And so does the next step, *dāna-sīla*—virt ue—which we talked about in the beginning of the retreat. Simple precepts: to not kill, not steal, not lie, not misuse sexuality, intoxicants, things like that. It's pretty simple. It's hard to meditate after a day of killing and stealing, right? It doesn't work terribly well.

But more than that, it means a shift from greed and ignorance and being caught in things—because that's what you're caught in when you hate or when you kill or when you steal. You're caught in those powerful forces, and releasing those means shifting your identity from the fear and the grasping to one of reverence for life. Both outwardly, but also inwardly. How do you treat yourself? To care for others and not belittle yourself.

As you act with integrity, the true spirit of integrity is a growing of the heart and mind. It's a kind of freedom. It's a shift of identity. Thomas Jefferson said, "One man or woman with courage is a majority." And that just touches me when I hear it. It means that any human being who's willing to stand up for what really matters in their being can change everything.

So there's a beauty and again a shift of identity invited in this practice of *sīla*, of integrity. From being caught in the things of this world to discovering that you are free to act with your conscience no matter what the circumstances.

I have this story from Ada Shibley, who was a peacemaker working between Palestine and Israel with different peace groups. She was trying to bring a group of people from Palestine to meet with Israeli counterparts, and particularly this wonderful fellow named Ishmael, who'd gone through losses in his family, had been in prison, but became a great peacemaker. They got to the border crossing, and on their little minibus, a woman who was a soldier came on and said, "Give me your IDs. Oh, you're an Arab.

You're a Palestinian. You can't come through this point. You've got to go two hours north and do this, and maybe they'll let you through."

They were on their way to a really important conference that they'd been working for weeks to arrange, bringing these parties together. Ada knew if Ishmael separated from the group, he'd never get in. She was really upset by it. The soldier said, "Get out, you don't have your papers," quite angrily. They were shocked.

And then Ada says, "I looked at this soldier and I saw a woman, a young woman with a uniform covering her youthful, beautiful body. And under her military hat, I saw long black hair tied in a ponytail." And with sharpness, the soldier kept saying, "No, get out. He needs to go to the other checkpoint."

She moved one way, and her hair moved differently. And I started listening to her hair. I didn't judge the human being standing in front of her. I just paused for a while and told her what we were doing. And I said, "Can you find any way to help us? I know the situation is really complicated. I can see that you want to help." Isn't that beautiful?

And somehow in this opening, she sort of moved her gun aside a little bit and said, "See that gate over there? If he walks slowly there and crosses through it, then he can come over and meet your bus on the other side in five minutes." And I said, "Thank you so much." And I told her more about the peace work we were trying to do, and we talked for a while.

And then she said, "I hate this. I hate going home to my mother who's feeding me, and I'm a soldier with a gun, and I can hardly let go of being a soldier. I can't smile." And I became curious. I wanted to ask her about her hair. I was convinced it had its own language. She said, "It's my reminder that I'm a woman. I'm born into life to love. I tend to forget this under this uniform, and I've forgotten how to smile. There's so much suffering I've seen. But then my hair slaps my face. It blows and reminds me I'm a woman. No one can bury this fact under any uniform. So when I'm out of here, I will work for peace like you." And now she was speaking the same language, and her hair was soft and calm.

There's something about our human possibility in which we can be caught up in hate and greed and so forth. And then the teachings invite us to step out of that and to find a truer, freer, bigger heart in the circumstance. It's a shift of identity.

After dāna and sīla comes bhāvanā—cultivation. And it's sometimes divided into two parts or several parts. In this case: sīla, samādhi, and paññā. Samādhi means concentration. And so here you're sitting and walking for the first couple of days, and you may have noticed that the attention is a bit scattered. Yes?

Albert Einstein put it this way. He said—and this was in Scientific American, by the way, it's not an internet artifact—"If you can drive safely while kissing a girl, you're simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves." And this is really talking about the way we get so lost in electronics. I mean, I'm sorry for you. For our teen retreats, the big moment at the start is when they have to turn in the part of

their anatomy that's made by Apple, basically. It's an amazing thing. Who will I be without Instagram and Snapchat, all my friends, and so forth? But you're the victims in a certain way of it as well.

And you sit and you begin to practice, and there comes a shift of identity from the torrent of thoughts that Trudy and West described, from the torrent of emotions, and you begin to let yourself get calmer and clearer, quiet the mind a bit.

Here is a letter written by David Armitage:

"Some years ago, I attended a rigorous six-year academic program at one of the famous colleges in Boston that required me to work during the day, take my classes at night, and do piles of homework on the weekends. On the first summer off, I wanted to get far away from these studies and work with my hands close to the earth, so I went to live with an Amish family in Pennsylvania. The experience renewed me, and I decided to do it again the next summer.

That year, I drove from Boston to Pennsylvania on a holiday weekend. The roads were crowded. A close friend had just died. The trip took hours and hours, and by the time I arrived, just before dusk, I was exhausted and anxious. My Amish host had delayed dinner for me. During the meal, I tried to act natural, but I felt full of nerves."

My host could clearly tell something was amiss, because at the end of dinner he said, "Come with me." I followed him to their backyard, which bordered on an alfalfa field. Although his faith discouraged smoking, the farmer lit a cigarette. Three of his children gambled about while two others clung to him. The farmer stood without saying a word, looking out over the alfalfa, and I did the same.

The dark green field was becoming harder to see in the fading light. The sky was peach at the horizon and deep blue higher up. Stars began to appear. And then, out of the alfalfa, rose fireflies. A few at first, but soon there were hundreds. Their pinpricks of light mingled with the stars—heaven and earth meeting in this humble man's backyard. My nervousness left me. The farmer turned and said, "That's for you."

And this is for you—to come here, to walk among the trees and among these hills, to step out of the busy rounds of your life and let yourself begin to quiet your mind and open your heart so that you can live in a freer and different way.

Samadhi means to calm and steady the mind, to concentrate. But the way that it works, as Trudy talked about last night, is not through striving and tension, but through a dedication or devotion that is both relaxed—here's the key—concentration grows when you are both relaxed and alert, relaxed and present.

Some people, new or even more experienced practitioners, will go on a concentration retreat. Those who practice for a while often find, "This really helped me to just focus on concentration for a while. It steadied me." Others find that there's so much else going on that if they try to concentrate too much in the first days, with all the other things arising, they're struggling against their experience. They need to open their

field of attention and just be more mindful of everything. But over these days you will get more concentrated. You will be more present with the breath and body and what arises. And you want to do it gently.

As Julia Child said in her instructions, if you're in the kitchen and you drop the lamb, you can just pick it up. It's the same thing with the breath and your attention. You're there, you're paying attention, your attention goes off a thousand times. It's the very coming back with relaxed ease and dedication that matters. And in concentration, you want to start looking for those moments of ease, of joy, of simplicity—the little half smile that Wes invited you to this morning. Little by little, you start to have these moments where you realize, "Oh, a moment of ease. Two moments of ease. Some sense of joy." We have this negativity bias; we're always looking for problems. But in concentration, you actually want to tune yourself to the glimmers, the beginnings of wellbeing, and let them get nurtured. Concentration grows from trust, spaciousness, practice, and dedication. Little by little, the mind will settle in quiet.

Dana, sila, samadhi, panna—wisdom and mindfulness. So here you are, sitting, walking, mindfully eating on a good day when you're lucky. And the instructions from the Buddha are this: "My friends, there is a most wonderful way for living beings to realize purification, overcome grief and sorrow, end pain and anxiety, travel the true path, and realize liberation of heart and mind. And this is the establishment of mindfulness, mindful awareness."

Establishing mindfulness, the practitioner remains mindful of the body, mindful of feelings, mindful of the mind, and mindful of all the dharmas—of all the relations between things that arise and pass. Sitting, walking, standing, and lying down are all opportunities, the Buddha goes on to say, to practice this liberating quality of mindfulness. This is what we're doing here. And we're calling it also loving awareness—putting mindfulness and metta together.

So you're sitting here feeling the breath, and then after three breaths or five breaths or however long it happens to be, the attention goes elsewhere. What to do when it goes elsewhere? If you're not just devoted in that sitting to concentrating on the breath—which you can be, especially in these first days—you want to allow yourself to shift and receive, with the same careful attention you give to the breath, the other strong experience that's pulled your attention away.

Maybe it's pain in the body. How do you touch the pain that's in your body? With fear? With aversion? Do you tense around it with the desire to get it to go away, to try to fix it? That's our kind of normal strategy, isn't it? But the fact is that you have joy and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Anybody not have these? It's part of the human incarnation ride that you get. We all have it.

So then the question is: Can we be present? Can the identity begin to shift so we're not battling our experience or fighting it, but rather holding it with loving awareness?

And that means when there's pain there, the things you can do are to name it: tightness, throbbing, fire,

fire, pain, pain. And to hold it with loving awareness the way you would hold a sick child, maybe, or a child that's crying. You've fed them and diapered them and done all the things, and they're still crying. What do you do? You pick them up, you hold them, and after a while they settle down. With loving awareness, when there's pain or difficulty in the body, you turn your attention to it, receive it with that mindful, spacious attention, and hold it kindly.

And then one of three things will happen. It'll soften and get easier. It'll stay the same, or it will get worse. That's not your job. Yours is to be the loving awareness itself.

Frank Ostaseski, who helped found the Zen Center Hospice, writes about a fellow he worked with who asked if Frank could teach him to meditate. He was in a lot of pain and he was in the last weeks of his life. He had stomach cancer. And it wasn't usually Frank's habit to teach dying people how to meditate, but he said, okay, we'll give it a try. So he oriented his attention toward the painful sensations, except that as soon as he tried to go to the painful sensations, it was too much for him. He started screaming, "I can't, it's too much. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts." Frank said, "Okay, let's try something else." And he put his hand on the man's stomach and said, "How's that?" Very gently, lovingly. He said, "Oh, that hurts too much." Frank said, "Okay." And he put his hands a foot or two away. "How's that?" He said, "Oh, it still hurts." "Okay." And he put his hands way out, made this big field around his body, still kind of focusing on loving kindness. And he said, "Oh, that's a little better." So Frank put his hands further away from him. And he said, "Oh, that's lovely, actually." There's no energetic bodywork, no California voodoo or anything. Just more space, just the space of awareness and love. And his words, not Frank's, not "my meditation," then came: "Oh, rest in love, rest in love." And when he'd get in trouble, he'd push his morphine pump and just repeat to himself, "Rest in love, rest in love." Maybe the morphine helped, who knows?

But you start to realize that you can be in the presence of your experience, your bodily experience, a painful one, or a beautiful, joyful one—receive the opening of the body, which will happen here—all with the space of loving awareness. And then identity begins to change. Because usually you take it as your pain. "Oh, God, I have a headache. My back aches. Poor me. Am I going to have this? Is it going to get worse tomorrow?" You know how the mind is. "Oh, my God, how will I finish ten days? Today's already achy. They're going to have to wheel me out of here." You want to go home to your mother if you had a nice mother. Some of you. Some of you want to go home to your mother and get chicken soup or whatever. And you just build huge stories around that pain. "Oh, I'm going to have to get surgery for my knee pain. I know. I'll be the first person at Spirit Rock to have to get surgery before they leave." And things like that.

But after a time, it shifts from being your pain to just being pain. And as you get wiser, it shifts from being just pain to being the pain.

It's not just your pain actually. When you get quiet and open, you realize it's the pain of having a body. Everybody shares in this. She does and he does—it's part of it.

And there I was at Dana-Farber, looking at all these people tending their loved ones who had cancer. It

wasn't somebody's cancer. It was our human lot—that we have at some point in our life aging or sickness or pain. And so it's not that you've done something wrong or that you shouldn't have it. But you become mindful and you note, "Oh, pain." And you touch it and hold it with a merciful, kind attention. And you start to discover that that's not who you are—that you are the loving awareness that can notice it.

And then you notice this other stuff that happens. You get bored or restless. And these are really important—to be bored. It is. And restless. Anybody who hasn't been bored hasn't been paying attention here. I mean, you're just doing your breath, right?

Because when you're home and you're bored, what do you do? You open the refrigerator. Or you get online or something. Because you can't be with yourself. You can't bear your boredom or your loneliness or your restlessness. So you can't actually be a human being who's present for yourself.

So here, if you're bored, be bored. And then you name it. "Bored, bored." There you are breathing. "I feel so bored." "Bored, bored." Or you're restless. And you think, "Oh my god, I'm so restless. I have to go walk. But they haven't rung the bell. I hope they ring the bell." "Hoping, hoping, hoping." And that settles down.

"But I'm so restless." You just name it. "Restless, restless, hoping, hoping." And then it settles down after a while and you can continue. Or maybe it doesn't settle down. It gets worse. "Restless, restless." "I can't stand it. It's too hard. I don't know what to do." It feels like you're jumping out of your skin.

You know what to do? Then you say to yourself, "All right, I'll die of restlessness. I'll be the first person this fall to die of restlessness at Spirit Rock." You surrender. You say, "Take me." And the minute that you say, "Take me, I'll die of restlessness," something interesting happens. Guess what? It gets easier—because most of the difficulty is your resistance to the experience.

"Oh my God, it's terrible, terrible." Dying, dying, dying—you're naming it "dying." OK, dying. I've died for a while. All right, still bored. Restless, restless. Dying, dying. OK, wonder what they're going to have for lunch?

Because the mind has no pride at all. You'll see it. It deals with something, and then it goes on to something else.

Or fear comes, and you think, "Oh, I shouldn't be afraid." Everybody's afraid at some point. Fear is the membrane between what you know and the unknown, and it's part of being human. So what do you do when fear arises? You can either identify with it—"my fear, I'm afraid"—or you name it. "Oh, here it is, strong. Fear, fear." The sweatiness, the stopping of the breath. You feel it in your body. You feel the emotion. And you look at it.

It tells a story. As Mark Twain said, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." And so you see its story. And the loving awareness is bigger than the fear. Fear, fear. "Oh my God, it's horrible." Terror, terror. "I think I'm going to die." Thinking, thinking. You're not actually dying.

"Oh, but I'm doing pretty well with it. I'm hanging in there." Pride, pride. And you just start to notice the different experiences rise and fall in the field of loving awareness.

Or loneliness comes. The poet Hafez says, "Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few ingredients can." So you note it. Lonely, lonely. And then your tears come, because as you sit, the unfinished business of the heart will arise—your loneliness and the regrets and the grief. You want to honor it and bow to it and say, "Ah, grieving. Tears, tears." They're called tears of the way, tears of the Dharma. Weeping, weeping. And you let that happen. And then you think, "What's for lunch?" Because that's what happens. And you start to see that these experiences are not you and they're not personal.

There's an expression I just learned—I think it might be from Russian, it might be Czech—but it's an idiom used about difficulties that goes, "Not my circus, not my monkey." The idiom basically means it's just not your problem. That's true for these emotions. They come and they do their dance—the fear and the joy, the judging mind.

Have you noticed the judging mind? You judge others: how they're practicing, who comes in late, how much food they're taking—all the judgment you project outward. And then all the self-judgment.

What to do? As Florida Scott Maxwell, the novelist, said, "No matter how old she is, a mother looks to her middle-aged children for signs of improvement." We have built into us this history of how we're supposed to be, and it comes out in the judging mind. So you sit here and judgment comes. You say, "I shouldn't judge. Stop judging."

"I hate that judgment." But what's that? Just more judgment.

So what can you do? You bow to it. You name it. "Oh, judging mind. Thank you for your opinion." You know whose voice it is—we won't talk about them. "Thank you for your opinion." And then you feel your breath again.

Or the doubting mind arises: "I can't do this. This is too hard. Everybody else looks like a Buddha, and I'm sitting here completely unable to do it. I'm the loser in the class. I'm the dunce, the Dharma dunce." All those things you tell yourself. And you say, "Thank you for your opinion." That's all. That's just the doubting mind. It's not who you are.

And then with loving awareness, you watch the thoughts that come and go. Little by little and gradually, there comes—equally naturally—a sense of ease and joy and a steadiness of love. That little half smile of the Buddha. You say, "Oh, there's the judging mind again." Or, "I know fear. Oh, I've seen you fifty times this retreat. Hello, fear. I know you." And it loses its power over you because it's not who you are. Who you are is the spirit, is this loving awareness that was born into your body.

When my daughter Cindy was in first grade, we took a trip to California to visit my family. While we were

there, she lost a tooth. She ran into the kitchen to show me and asked, "Could the tooth fairy fly that far?" My mom shot me a look of concern and later suggested that by indulging in such fantasies, I was teaching my child not to trust adults. Wasn't Cindy going to feel betrayed when she found out the truth?

So the next time Cindy lost a tooth, she chattered with excitement as I put her to bed. "How does the tooth fairy get in?" she asked. "Through the window," I explained. "Shouldn't we unlock it then?" she asked. "Oh, I do that right before I go to bed," I said. "Why does the tooth fairy want everybody's teeth?" she went on.

I took a deep breath and considered my mother's advice. Cindy would soon figure out the truth anyway, so I told my inquisitive seven-and-a-half-year-old that in fact I was the tooth fairy. She cried hard. I apologized, explained that she was getting to an age at which it was more important for me to be honest with her than to play imaginary games. We cuddled for a while and she stopped crying. She had one last question: "What do you wear?"

You see, your thoughts will tell you all these stories. Not only are there emotions like loneliness and fear and sadness and tears, but there's also the tedium of it all. There's a cartoon in the New Yorker: a car crossing the vast Utah desert, and there's this roadside billboard that reads, "Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles." Basically a description of meditation.

There are reruns. You're stuck in Motel 6 late at night, and you can't turn the channel, and you can't turn it off. Ninety-some percent of the thoughts you have today were ones you thought yesterday.

They're repeats. Okay, thank you for your opinion.

So instead, you can note: *oh, planning mind... oh, remembering... oh, judging mind... doubting mind*—and then you come back to your breath. And the loving awareness allows you to step out of the thrall of the judgments and the thoughts, the gaining and the evaluation, and to actually be the presence itself. *Sila, samadhi, paññ*a.

I should probably stop here, but there's one more piece to go, because there are two wings to what allows the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to move through the world freely. One is the wing of wisdom or mindful understanding, and the other is the wing of love and compassion. They go together, which is why we're talking about loving awareness.

So as you sit, you will have at times expansion and pleasure and delight and joy that opens. Let yourself embody it, tend to it, inhabit it when it comes. And as you sit, you will suffer as well—because you get the tainted glory of humanity, all the beauty of it and the pleasure. You stop running around and running away, and you actually get to be present for it.

The Sufis put it this way: "Overcome any bitterness because you are not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you. Like the mother of the world, each of us is sharing a part of her heart, and therefore each human being is endowed with a certain measure of cosmic pain. You are called upon to

meet it in compassion instead of self-pity."

Instead of "oh, poor me," we meet it and say: this is the pain of being a human being, along with the pleasure of being a human being. We all carry our measure of this. The question is, again, how do you carry it? Do you take it personally? Do you fight? Do you struggle in unhealthy ways? Or is there a way that you can carry it with dignity, with a free heart?

There's this little passage from Lewis Mumford: "A person of courage never needs weapons, but they may need bail." There's something about the courage of compassion. It's actually what allows you to show up for the world. Without compassion, you can't even be here fully, without this tenderness of heart.

And compassion is actually a strength. In the West, we think of love as a kind of weakness, but love is actually—well, you see these images of mothers picking cars up off their children. It's an immense power. When you begin to discover that within you is the great heart of compassion, then you can carry that anywhere and everywhere.

Thich Nhat Hanh says it so simply: "When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person in the boat remained calm and steady, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

So you become that one person.

Somebody asked this beautiful question this morning about merit, and buried in the question a little bit—at least as I heard it—was also: are we doing this for ourselves, or is there some other purpose to it? As if, in some way, we could even separate ourselves from the rest. Like the trees that Trudy talked about.

Alice Walker wrote it this way. She said, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was. And it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I ran all around the house."

In fact, when it happens, you can't miss it. As we quiet the mind and open the heart, we begin to feel our connection with life. We're not separate from it. Our identity shifts. It is us.

And then you begin to realize as well that what this world needs more than anything is a change of heart, a change of consciousness. Ajahn Chah said, "Dharma means heart. Dharma is the work of the heart."

No amount of computers and internet and nanotechnology and space technology and biotechnology—all these amazing scientific things where we have the great library of Alexandria in our pockets—I mean, you have everything, maybe not everything you need, but all that information. But that isn't enough to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing environmental destruction. No amount of outer development will do it.

We have all this outer development and look at the world as it is. So at this time, what humanity needs is

to match the outer development of life with the inner development. We need wisdom. We need virtue. We need someone who's unafraid to stand up for the truth no matter what. We need generosity to see it's not me, but it's us. As Mother Teresa says, if you're lonely, if you have difficulty, the problem is you draw your family circle too small. It's all us. And so the shift of identity is into the great heart of compassion as well.

There's a book entitled *I Wish My Teacher Knew*, and these are second and third graders' handwriting—you know, those books with the little scrawly handwriting from kids. "I wish my teacher knew that I don't have pencils at home to do my homework." "I wish my teacher knew that my mom doesn't sign my reading log because she can't read." "I wish my teacher knew that after my mom got diagnosed with cancer, I'd been without a home three different times this year." "I wish my teacher knew that my dad works two jobs and I don't see him hardly at all." "I wish my teacher knew that my little brother gets scared and I get worried when he wakes me every night." "I wish my teacher knew that I'm smarter than she thinks." Isn't that lovely? "I wish my teacher knew that I love animals and would do anything for my animals. I would love to work at the SPCA so I could help animals get adopted." And you just hear the hearts of these children. This is our humanity, but it's not just them. It's you. It's all of us.

I remember sitting here one evening during teachings some years ago. A woman who had practiced here for some time, whose daughter had died, came just torn apart. As you can imagine, the death of your child is something really hard to go through. She said, "In the middle of this retreat is the day my daughter died. So I'd like permission to ring the bell outside 108 times in her honor." And so it was the sitting maybe before the talk or something, just getting dusk, and she went out. We'd had a memorial service for her daughter who had died, her teenage daughter, a few years before and rung the bell 108 times. And she went out and it was as if she was using the bell to talk to her daughter. She took the striker and she just whacked the bell as if her daughter could somehow hear her. We were sitting and I had to tell people why the bell was ringing. I said, "This woman who's on the retreat, her daughter died, teenage daughter, just a few years ago. And this is the day and the time." And we were all sitting there weeping because it wasn't just her daughter, but it was everybody who's ever lost anyone.

Yitzhak Perlman, one of the greatest violinists in the world, had polio as a child and was injured by it so that he has to walk with braces. He can't walk in an easy way. He was playing a violin concerto with the New York Symphony, maybe Lincoln Center or one of the great halls there. He'd walked on stage, put down his walking aids, took out his violin, and began to play. Partway through the performance, where he was doing a solo part, all of a sudden there was this loud crack and a string broke on his violin. Everybody wondered, what is he going to do? I'm sure it was a Stradivarius or some amazing violin. Would he get up and kind of use his braces and walk over and get another violin? Would he get one from the concertmaster? He sat for a moment and paused and then nodded to the conductor to continue, and he played the whole rest of the concerto on three strings. People were riveted because it's not scored in that way and not easy to do. When it was finished, he got this wild applause and standing ovation from everyone. When it quieted down, he sort of quieted everybody down. He had something to say. He looked

out and said, "Sometimes in life, what matters is to see how much music you can make with what you have left." It was a metaphor for his whole life, really—the body that he was given, the polio that he had. The string was really just a moment. But there's something deeper.

Oh, nobly born, begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember your true nature. Your true nature is loving awareness itself. It's the spirit that came into this body. It's the spirit that will leave this body, that animates, that receives all things. Become, as Ajahn Chah said, the one who knows. Become compassion. Become awareness itself.

And what we're doing with this very difficult and beautiful training—you're so lucky. Even with the difficulties, they're actually the best part. They're the part that train the greatness of heart. So they're fine. People come in and say, "I'm having a hard time," as if I'm going to give them a grade of C-minus. But actually I get really interested and appreciative. Oh, how's that going? Can you keep that dignity and loving awareness through it all?

This is our invitation—to sit and walk and be present. And as you transform your heart, you bring the gift that the world most needs to all you touch.

I've seen it in Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela. We visited Aung San Suu Kyi after seventeen years of prison and house arrest. She said, "You know, it wasn't really prison or house arrest because I never let myself hate them. I did it as a practice, a seventeen-year retreat." And now she's the light of Burma, running her country. Nelson Mandela walked out of prison with so much magnanimity and graciousness.

And that is your birthright—that you too can practice in this way.

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