The Buddha's Last Teachings | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:00:27

So this evening I want to give a talk following one of the great Buddhist texts, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, which is a teaching on the last year of the Buddha's life.

When you look at the Buddhist texts, they're full of stories—encounters with people who come to see the Buddha seeking understanding or relief from suffering or healing, philosophers and yogis trying to understand the mind. He meets them all and gives each one an individual instruction: sometimes mindfulness training, sometimes compassion, sometimes wisdom, sometimes the training in virtue and ethics, sometimes the training in how to tend one's body and heart.

This particular text is one of my favorite teachings. I've returned to it every three or four years for quite a while because I find it inspiring. These teachings are meant to be examined as a kind of experiment for yourself, reflecting on how they affect you or point to something important in your own life.

I want to speak of these teachings not as history—because while it's a historical account of his last year, that approach can feel dry, like recounting what I did last summer. Instead, I want to present it as myth, as part of one of the greatest myths of humankind: the myth of the Buddha leaving the princely life and becoming an ascetic, sitting under the tree of enlightenment, discovering awakening, teaching people, returning to his own family, and traveling on foot throughout India for forty-five years. The myth of the Buddha is a story of what's possible for us.

The reason I want to teach it in mythological terms is that you'll hear it sounds that way. It begins with the phrase "Thus I have heard," which is a little bit like "once upon a time." And it ends with "This is how it was in the old days." So you can settle back and listen to this story that speaks from an ancient heart, timeless, to your own.

This teaching has two main themes. One is how the Buddha wants to leave his teachings as guidance to practice, to empower the community and people who are following him. The second is to foster wiser relationships to one another in the spiritual community and to the world.

The setting for this teaching is Vulture's Peak—already a kind of mythological word—a mountain in northern India that rises from the plains near the modern province of Bihar. In those days, the region was covered with great forests and huge trees and wild animals. Now it has become deforested, more desert land with poorer soils. But then it was verdant and fecund and filled with life. That's where the monks and

nuns and followers of the Buddha heard these teachings along the plain of the Ganges.

The text offers empowerment by setting up the image of a kingdom of justice and compassion and respect. How should we continue to practice when you, the Buddha, have gone? He's preparing people for the end of his life.

It begins with a dialogue where the minister from the King of Magadha, one of the local kingdoms, comes to see the Buddha and asks, "Should we make war on the Vajjians? There is a possibility of conflict building up. Should we engage in war? Should we back off? What should we do?"

Instead of giving advice about whether they should engage in war, the Buddha in his usual way invites them to inquire deeply. He says, "Tell me, do the Vajjians meet together in harmony, listen to one another respectfully, and depart in harmony?"

The minister says, "Yes, they do."

The Buddha replies, "Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians protect those who are vulnerable among them—the children, the women, the elderly, the sick?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians stay true to the ancient teachings of living with virtue and understanding and cultivating the heart?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. Tell me, do the Vajjians take care of the nature shrines and of the environment in which they live as a sacred place?"

"Yes, they do."

"Then they can be expected to prosper and not decline."

The minister left and returned to his king, saying, "The Buddha said these Vajjians are doing all the things that make them strong and help them prosper and make a beautiful society." Listening to each other in harmony—I wish we were doing that more in our current time—respecting the vulnerable, taking care of the natural environment, following the deep teachings of wisdom.

Then the Buddha turns to his own community. "So to you monks, so to you nuns, so to you lay followers: you should follow in their footsteps. You should cultivate listening to each other with respect and harmony, taking care of the vulnerable among you, sustaining the natural world around you, preserving your own personal mindfulness. Thus you too will prosper and not decline. As long as the monks and nuns, both in public and in private, show loving-kindness to their companions through acts of body, speech, and thought, and share their virtuous actions with one another, so long will they prosper and not

decline. For this is the basis for the freedom of heart, for liberation."

This is how the teaching begins—by setting up what a wise kingdom looks like, both among the Vajjians and for us at this time. What would a wise society look like? To listen deeply, to care for the vulnerable and the environment.

But here's my question for you: if we take this as a myth and not just history, why didn't the Buddha say, "You shouldn't go to war against the Vajjians—they might defeat you, they cannot be defeated"? Reflect for a moment: why didn't he do that?

One of the things that's important to hear in this is that instead of saying "do this" or "do that," the Buddha is pointing to the underlying causes, not just the effects of things—to see that if we live in a certain way, what will be the outcome? He wants those who are listening to him, those who are seeking wisdom, to inquire in themselves: What is it that makes a wise society? What gives strength and courage? To see the causes rather than receive a simple answer.

The rest of this long text of many pages, this sutra, is the gist of his travels, the announcement of his death, the last disciples, the last teachings, what he wants people to keep in mind and follow, his last meal, and what happens at his death.

Here are some of the stories.

At this point, the Buddha wanders with a company of renunciates and lay followers from Vulture's Peak to Pavarika's mango grove near Nalanda. There, as he sits quietly, his chief disciple, the wisest of them, Sariputra, comes up to him and looks at him with great admiration. "There will never be a better, never be a more enlightened teacher than you, oh master," he says, speaking to the Buddha.

The Buddha raises his eyebrows and looks back at Sariputra, wise though he's supposed to be. "Do you know the other Buddhas from the other eras?"

"No," says Sariputra.

"Do you know the ones from the past?"

"No."

"Do you know the ones in the future?"

"No."

"Do you know the extent of the Buddha's mind sitting in front of you?"

"No, sir."

"Then how can you say such a thing?"

Sariputra responds to the Blessed One: "Just as if there were a great city surrounded by a mighty wall, and there was one entrance gate into the city. At the entrance gate stood someone who was watchful and caring, compassionate and strong, courageous, who noticed what wanted to come into the city or who was leaving, and could discern: this is for the benefit of those living in this place, and this is not for the benefit. In the same way," said Sariputra, "the awakened ones of all the eras and all the times rest at the gateway of mindfulness and notice as thoughts come and go, as experiences rise and pass, as people and interactions happen. They quiet themselves and, as if standing at the gate, they receive all of this with discernment and loving awareness, with mindfulness. In so doing, they allow that which is healthy into themselves, and that which is not, they do not."

Rumi writes this poem: "What use is it to make such a fuss when we will soon enough all go through that same gate?" And of course, he's speaking of the gate at the end of life.

But this is a beautiful teaching. Here, Sariputra answers: all right, I don't know the Buddhas of the past and present, but I know the nature of liberation itself. When we rest in the present and can notice what arises, with discernment seeing this is healthy and this is unhealthy, and with that discernment follow—that is the gateway to our freedom and to our liberation.

As they wander further along the banks of the Ganges River, the Buddha and those following take a seat at some point. The Buddha says, "Tell me, those of you who are practicing to cross the flood of sorrow—when you get to the other side, what will you do with the raft of your teachings?" He explains: "These teachings are a raft to cross over, to make a bridge, to help you across the flood of confusion and difficulty. By establishing mindfulness, by establishing concentration and stillness and steadiness, by establishing integrity—these become your raft. But when you cross the flooded Ganges, then what do you do with the raft? Do you carry it around with you?"

Of course, the disciples, being wise, say, "No, we don't, sir. No, we don't."

And the Buddha says, "Just so. These are teachings to use. These are teachings to guide you, but they're not teachings to carry. They're simply used to cross over the moments and days of confusion or fear, to have these teachings to cross over into the peace of liberation, which you can do in a moment. And then you leave the teachings aside."

As the story goes along, the Blessed One continued and sat to rest under a great tree in the forest, asking to be alone to meditate. As he did, Mara came—who in this language, in that time, is the incarnation of ignorance, greed, and hatred, sometimes translated as "the evil one," although I don't think evil is quite the right language for Mara. Certainly the opposite of enlightenment.

As you all know, in the great story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree, Mara came and tried to tempt him with his beautiful daughters and every possible desire. The Buddha just sat there and said, "I see you, Mara." Then Mara threw flaming arrows and spears at the Buddha, and he touched them with his

fingers and heart of compassion, and they turned to flower petals at his feet. Then Mara tried doubts: "Who do you think you are to sit in this way? You don't even know what's possible." And then the goddess of the earth rose up and swept away Mara, saying, "This human being has sat and established the basis of liberation in his own heart for so long. He does understand it."

Well, it turns out Mara keeps coming back. You may have noticed this in your own life. You go to retreat, you do your own meditation, things seem hunky-dory, everything's fine, you're in a great place—and then who comes knocking? Mara reappears.

And the thing is, if you read in these texts, Mara comes back forty times during the Buddha's life. When he has a backache, or when things are difficult in his community, or during various struggles, Mara appears. This is because, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, no Mara, no Buddha. The Buddha and Mara actually inter-are. Without Mara, the Buddha wouldn't have something to awaken from.

We all carry this within ourselves. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer and peace activist, said: "If only there were evil people out there insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were simply necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our own heart?"

So Mara will appear for you, as he does for the Buddha, over and over in this story. And each time Mara appears, the Buddha says, "Is that you, Mara?"

In this case, Mara says, "I've come to see you many times and said it's time for you to quit your teaching. You should retire. You should end your life. You've done what you wanted. And you always said, 'I need to have a great community of people. I need to benefit people and have them benefit one another. Only then can I take final nirvana.'" And Mara said, "Now you've done this. It's time for you to let go."

The Buddha reflects and says, "Yes, Mara. Later this year, I will take my final nirvana."

Now, why does Mara keep coming? You'd think there's happily ever after enlightenment, wouldn't you? But it's not like that. The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Mara is part of the myth and part of the human incarnation of our dance.

Mara has been visiting you, and every time you meditate, you might get quiet for a little bit and then Mara comes. It doesn't matter if you're in Des Moines or Florida or Belfast, Ireland—Mara will find you. And then you can say, "Oh yes, doubt, fear, confusion. Is that you, Mara?" The minute you can acknowledge it and say, "Oh Mara, I know you," then Mara loses his power.

So as soon as the Buddha said to Mara, "Yes, finally I will end my dispensation, I will end my teaching—this year I will pass into final nirvana," there was a great earthquake, a terrible hair-raising earthquake and thunder. Ananda, his attendant, came running and said, "What is the cause of this great

earthquake?"

The Buddha explained there are great earthquakes because of the movement of the earth, but there are also earthquakes when a Buddha is conceived, when he's born or she's born, when he's enlightened, when he first turns the wheel of the Dharma, and when he renounces his teaching.

But why the image of an earthquake? Because it's the shaking of the foundation of all the ground we stand on. The enlightenment, the teachings of birth and death—the earthquake says this is what awakens us from the dream of separateness and solidity. There's something greater here in our human incarnation. Who are you really? Remember, you are consciousness itself born into this body. You're the witness to it all. And the earthquake reminds you of this.

Then Ananda weeps and begs, "Please stay! Many times you've told me that you could live a long, long time. Please don't die."

The Buddha replies, "I gave you hints that I could stay a long time, but you never asked me until this moment. I gave you hints that if you told me three times I must stay for a long time, I could do so. These hints I told you at the Black Snake Pool and at Jivika's mango grove and at the deer park in Rajgir and the cool wood in Tipota. Each time you could have said, 'Please stay and live long and long,' but you did not. So yours is the fault, Ananda."

How about your teacher saying that at the end of his life or her life? "Yours is the fault." Talk about a serious guilt trip. "Yours is the failure for not asking, Ananda."

And then he went on: "Now my body is old, like an old cart held together by straps and thongs, and you have not asked me to stay."

So this year I will take my final Nirvana.

How can we understand this? Why would the Buddha say this to his most beloved attendant, his cousin, the person that everybody respected? He says, "It's your fault, Ananda." Reflect for a moment. What could this mean?

Yes, his body is like an old cart, and that's what happens to our bodies. But there's something deeper in this. He's trying to say that the teacher-student relationship is not one way—that everyone you relate to, those who are your teachers, and everyone becomes your teacher in some way, but especially where you receive important teachings—is a two-way responsibility. You have to listen and tend and be caring as they do. It is an interdependent relationship. And thus it is your responsibility to be in that relationship and offer yourself, as that other person—the wise one, the teacher, the person you're learning from—does too.

Now it's also true that later, just before the Buddha dies, he praises Ananda as he'd done often in these texts—for his care and beauty, how pleasant he is for everyone who's come to see the Buddha, how he

tends them well, the qualities of his timing and sensitivity. He loves Ananda, and it's a very clear relationship. But this is a moment where he's saying, "This is a two-way deal, Ananda, and you and I have to take care of each other." If you want to awaken, this is what you too need to remember.

Then it goes along in another scene. The Buddha and the gathering of renunciates and lay followers leave and travel along the Ganges River, and he offers teachings to the large company of followers. Each time he completes these teachings, when he's done, he sits quietly. Those who receive these teachings hear the last phrase he offers: "Now is time for you to go and do as you see fit."

Why would he say this? Each time someone comes with questions, he gives a response. Somebody asks for a teaching on mindfulness, compassion, forgiveness—he gives the teachings. And then he says, "Now it is time for you to go and do as you see fit."

What does this mean? What it points to is that the teacher cannot do it for you. No one can get enlightened for you. No one can love for you. No one can forgive for you. No one can awaken for you. No one can let go for you. So the Buddha offers his pointings, his teachings, his skillful means, his medicine. And then he says, "It's in your good hands. Now it is time for you to do as you see fit."

There's a beautiful empowerment in this that we can take into our lives, into all of our interactions with those we care about—because often it is the people you really care about. "It's now in your good hands." And that allows you to be peaceful and steady and caring, but not attached or grasping to the outcome.

Then Ananda and the senior monks and nuns ask the Buddha, "So once you are gone, who will be our guide?" A great question, when you don't have the great teacher with you.

The Buddha put no one in charge of the Sangha. He didn't say, "All right, now I deputize Sariputta or Ananda"—whoever it might be—"They will be the next Buddha to take over the community." He said, "The truth will be your guide. Be an island unto yourself. Let the Dharma teachings and the teachings of ethics and virtue—let them be your guide."

And they said, "How shall these be our guide? How can we know?" They responded, "What are the real teachings of the Buddha?"

He said there are four ways to know, because he liked to make lists. You heard it from the lips of the Blessed One. You heard it from the circle of elders. You learned it as respected teachings some masters had repeated. Should you follow these? Should you approve or not approve?

He said only—only if you consider in your own heart. Does this conform to the gist of the Dharma teachings that you have heard? Does it have a basis in virtue and ethics, not harming oneself and others? Then it is the path of liberation.

Does it have a basis in samādhi and quieting the mind, in looking deeply and listening? Then it is a path to liberation. Does it have a basis in wisdom, in seeing clearly? Then it is the teaching of the Blessed One.

Does it follow the Four Noble Truths—that there is suffering, that it acknowledges suffering, that it sees the causes of greed, hatred, and ignorance, that it offers the path of mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom to the end of suffering? If it does, then it is the teachings of the Blessed One.

And he went from place to place offering these fundamental teachings: the Four Noble Truths, the foundations of mindfulness, of loving awareness of the body, of feelings, of the play of the mind, and of our relations with one another. Establishing ourselves in mindful loving awareness, we begin to partake in the consciousness, in the mind, in the heart of liberation. We share that with the Blessed One.

Now the Buddha continues to wander. This is again an account of that whole last year. He comes to rest and practice in a large and beautiful forest grove. The texts describe the travel becoming difficult for him. His body is getting sicker now. Yet his heart is at peace.

In this forest grove, he becomes surrounded by followers—the word goes out that this may be the Buddha's last year of teaching. Five hundred or a thousand, they use these numbers, sometimes a thousand or ten thousand, renunciates and monastics and devoted lay people come. And there they are in the forest. Visiting dignitaries and yogis and people who hear about the Buddha arrive for teachings.

Here you see the Buddha in this part of the story, seated in the midst of this great following. In the distance, a retinue of the finest carriages arrives. The courtesan Ambapālī comes dressed in her finest silks with a whole coterie of young and beautiful women and their attendants, all in their finest silks and perfumes. They seat themselves near the Blessed One and bow and pay their respects, walking into the grove step by step with gestures of reverence.

When they do, it says the Buddha instructed and inspired and roused and awakened them. He taught them the four foundations of mindfulness, the gateways of liberation. He taught them about the dignity of virtue and living with integrity. As they sat to the side of the Buddha and listened deeply, there awakened in them a sense of freedom—the shift of identity from confusion and misunderstanding to realize that they could step back and be the loving witness of it all, not caught in their reactivity, not caught in separateness. And great delight arose in them.

Then Ambapālī, in response, invited the Buddha and a company of five hundred of his followers in a formal invitation to come and take a meal at her palace. The Buddha accepted.

And then an interesting thing happened. While they were still seated there, a whole new group of carriages came. You can tell how mythological this is—it's kind of wonderful. These were the nobles, the Licchavis of the local kingdom, of the great city nearby. They came and heard the last of the Buddha's teachings. He also roused them when they sat and paid their attention. They arrived dressed in blue and yellow and white, the text says, with great silks and adornment, royal carts and horses and elephants. It was their turn. Then they invited the Buddha to take a meal, which was the great way of making merit—saying, if we can offer something to you, you give us these amazing teachings, and now we want to

have this relationship where we support you and your followers. They wished to make the deepest of all merit by caring for the Blessed One.

The Buddha said, "I'm sorry, I cannot accept your invitation. I've already received an invitation from the courtesan Ambapālī, who is sitting over there with her retinue."

They became quite upset. "You accepted the invitation from that mango woman?" This was a kind of slang, a slur for being a courtesan. The Buddha said, "I accepted her invitation."

They grew so upset that they went over to her and said, "We want to make an offering and a meal for the Blessed One while he is here." She shook her head. They said, "We will give you one hundred thousand gold pieces."

And Ambapālī, whose heart had just awakened in the presence of the Buddha, said, "Not for a whole kingdom would I give up the chance to make an offering to the Blessed One"—because that was the source of her own awakening.

They went back and asked the Buddha again. He said, "I have accepted. Dear friends, she was first."

So why does the courtesan appear here in the myth, in the story? Reflect for a moment. It is a really beautiful teaching about who can practice and who is worthy of liberation. What are the deepest values of the Dharma?

These values say that not by caste or creed, not by race or birth, said the Buddha, does one become noble. One becomes noble by the state of one's heart. A truly radical teaching in a society where the Brahmin and Hindu structure was all about caste—who is above whom, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and the different levels of the castes, the Shudras, the untouchables.

And he said, no, nobly born you, who have the great heart that is capable of awakening. Each of you, oh nobly born, remember who you really are.

And he turned no one away. He saw the nobility of every human being. And so Ambapali really stands in for all the rest of us—for those who are wounded, those who have been cast aside in the culture, those who are insecure, all the ways we think we're not worthy. And the Buddha says, yes, you are worthy. You, human being, you come, and if you come with your sincerity, the dharma gates will open for you and will bless you.

And then as the story goes on, the last meal is offered to the Buddha at Pava Mango Forest. As the meal is offered, the Buddha says, "This portion is for me. No one else eat." And Kunda offered the best hard and soft foods. But it turns out that this last meal—depending on what story you read of it—contained something that had gone bad in the food, in the part that the Buddha took. And he knew it. He was already sick a lot that year. And he took this meal anyway, for whatever reason, perhaps because he knew finally it was his time. And it was offered with so much sincerity.

He ate it, and shortly thereafter described having pains like a knife cutting into his abdomen. That's how sick the dysentery became, and the difficulty. But even as he started to feel sick, he looked at Kunda the Smith and he said, "Thank you for offering this last meal. It is one of the most important offerings that a Buddha receives in his life. And you will make great blessings from this."

Now, why would he say this? Here you're giving the meal and the Buddha dies not long after. Doesn't seem like a very good thing. But what happened when you reflect on this is that the Buddha pointed to the purity of Kunda the Smith's intention. The key to karma is your motivation. And this was offered with such a pure heart and so much goodness that the Buddha said, it is your pure heart and your goodness that in the end will bear fruit.

And you can feel this in your own life. Even though it doesn't bear fruit right away, when you act out of truth, out of your deepest values, out of what you care about the most, and there's a purity and integrity in it—it not only feels right to you, but it makes the karma, sows the seeds of liberation and wellbeing and flowering.

And then, after this, he is taken to a nearby forest glade and sits by a stream and closes his eyes and goes into a deep meditation. When he wakes up, a man named Pukkusa walks by, and the Buddha says, "I am thirsty." And Pukkusa says, "I will get you water from the river, but some carts have crossed this river while you were meditating. Did you not see them?" And the Buddha said, "I did not." The blessed one was in another place, which was the state of deep samadhi. He said, "Even if five hundred carts had passed, in that state, timeless and transcendent, I would not have heard them."

And this is the state that is never born and never dies. The Buddha was seated there in the timeless realm of awareness itself, consciousness that creates all things. And then he returned to the incarnation of being the blessed one, the Buddha Gautama.

And Pukkusa said, "I cannot get you water from the river. It's all stirred up." And the Buddha said, "Please bring me some." And he brought the water in a container, and the Buddha held it in his hand. And it all became clear and purified, like you would put alum into a glass or a container with mud and it would all settle to the bottom. And again, this is a beautiful image of the Buddha's own mind and heart saying, you can bring me that which is muddy, and when I hold it in loving awareness and in the awakened consciousness that we are, it all settles and becomes clear.

And then Pukkusa said, "Let me offer the blessed one some robes for this last part of your journey." And he gave him these robes of burnished gold cloth. As the Buddha put the robes on, the gold cloth faded into the background and his own skin began to glow golden, brighter than the robes themselves.

What is this? The Buddha glowing in gold, the gold robes. Why is this in the story? Gold is a symbol of that which does not tarnish. No matter what happens, gold will not tarnish.

It holds its royal beauty. And so these robes and the glow of the Buddha represented that which is

untarnished by the arising and passing of all things.

And here, says Pakusa, the Blessed One who began to speak has roused and inspired us all, has set up that which has been knocked down, has pointed the way to one who is lost, who has carried a lamp into the dark places of the world so that those with eyes to see can see, and those with a heart to open can know that which is unborn, the timeless—the reality beyond our individual separateness, the freedom that we were born to. This is the Dharma body of the Buddha.

There was a very wonderful text at one point earlier. A man who was deeply devoted and inspired by the Buddha used to follow him around and gaze at him, because the Buddha was said to have been a handsome man with a handsome presence, a beacon of compassion and love and wisdom. This disciple would just stare at him.

After some weeks or months, some long time, the Buddha looked at this disciple and asked, "Why do you keep staring at me?"—knowing exactly the answer.

The man said, "Oh, I love to look at the Blessed One, to hear your words. I see you. You're so magnificent. You're so inspiring."

And the Buddha replied, "You do not see me. You only see this outer form, this body, these robes. That's not who I am."

The man paused and said, "Then how might I see you?"

The Buddha replied, "One who sees the depth of the Dharma—that is one who sees the Awakened One."

In any moment when you step out of the separate sense, the small sense of self, the separate body—sometimes called the body of fear—and feel first the interdependence with all that lives, and then beyond that recognize that consciousness is what you really are: timeless, unborn, awakened, free—then you see the Buddha, you know the Buddha.

After this, with Pakusa's golden robes, the Buddha could barely move, but he went along with great pains and severe bloody sickness. This is saying something about human nature. This is what happens in a human incarnation, in a human form. It is not something to be avoided by us. Birth, growing up, aging, sickness, death—part of the First Noble Truth. This is the nature of incarnation. It is not bad. It is simply the way things are. Trees, especially deciduous trees, have their leaves in the summer. Then fall comes and they drop their leaves and there is snow in the winter. Everything has its cycle. This is the nature of incarnate life.

And so here is the magnificent Blessed One, the Buddha, with great pains and severe bloody sickness. He laid down in the lion's pose on his right side—if you want to sleep like the Buddha, lie on your right side—between two sal trees. As he lay there, it says the trees immediately bloomed full of blossoms.

Then, for those who had the eyes to see, the great yogis who could look beyond this dimension to others, the atmosphere became filled with angels and devas: the devas of great purity and the radiant ones, the devas of great peace and the devas of magnificent beauty, the devas of boundless compassion. They all appeared surrounding the Buddha.

The Buddha said to those standing near him, "Move aside a little bit so that the angels and the unseen beings can also have their place to see the Blessed One."

Resting there quite sick, still with the trees blooming and Ananda tending him, Ananda said, "Do not die here. Do not die. Why don't you go from here into Kosala, or Banaras, Varanasi—to one of the great cities, to a palace where you can be honored, or the banks of the Ganges? Don't die in this miserable backwater"—in what the texts call a daub and wattle village, an old anthropological term for huts made of little staves of bamboo and mud. "Don't die here. Go to some magnificent place where we can celebrate your passing."

The Buddha paused and said, "Do not call this a miserable backwater." And here we are again in the myth of this story as we come toward the end. He said, "Once upon a time long ago, on this very spot an eon ago, there was a king named Mahasudassana who was a wheel-turning monarch, and his palace on this place was the center of a worldwide kingdom—prosperous, well populated, a kingdom of justice. The streets of Mahasudassana's kingdom were full of the sounds of elephants and carriages, of gongs and commerce, of cattle and cymbals and joy and prosperity. From here in every direction stretched great roads north and south and east and west. And so I will die in this place that has been the center of Mahasudassana's kingdom."

Why is this in the story? Reflect for a moment.

What could this mean?

I love this because what it says is that any place and every place can be the center of justice, can be the same kingdom of righteousness. Every place is the still point of the turning world, the place where Dharma can be awakened. It may have been a muddy crossroad, a primitive and undeveloped area with simple huts. But the Buddha said, if you could see as I do, every place is sacred. And this is a holy place that in its time has been magnificent, but every place in its time is magnificent—even now, if you only have eyes to see.

And finally, one last visitor comes, and Ananda says, "No, no, no, the Blessed One is sick." But the Buddha lifts his head and says, "No, he may ask the last question. Let him in. The teachings of the Blessed One are open-handed to all."

The last visitor asked his question, and the Buddha points him to the noble path of wise understanding, wise thought, wise action, not harming, right livelihood, right speech, right action, and the development of mindfulness, compassion, wisdom. And then he looks to everyone around and says, "I have shown you the

way. Does anyone have doubts?" And everyone is silent.

"I've taught you the way that leads to liberation, the way of virtue, of living with integrity and causing no harm to yourself and to other beings. I've taught you the way to quiet the mind and open the heart. I've taught you the great wisdom that releases you from the separate sense of self and opens you to timeless liberation—to what is called the sure heart's release."

As people listened quietly, he went on: "Then be of good resolve. All of you are nobly born. Remember who you really are—your own true nature." And he said, "If you practice wisely and rightly, the earth will never be free of enlightened beings." A beautiful teaching: if you practice wisely, this earth will never be free of awakened beings.

And finally he said, "Remember, all things that are created are impermanent. All that arises passes away. You must be a lamp unto yourself." Or as Mary Oliver says in her poem of the Buddha's last days: make of yourself a light, become the illumined one, become the awakened one yourself, and see with the eyes of freedom and wisdom.

In this passage from another poem of the Buddha:

I consider the position of kings and rulers as that of dust motes in a sunbeam. I see the treasures of gold and gems as broken tiles. I look upon the finest silken robes as tattered rags. I see the myriad worlds of the universe as small seeds, the great Indian ocean as drops of mud that soil one's feet. I perceive the teachings of the world to be the illusions of magicians—all the worldly teachings are but illusions. I look upon the judgment of right and wrong as the serpentine dance of dragons, and the rise and fall of beliefs but traces left by the four seasons. I rest in the timeless and awakened heart that has seen them all. I rest in peace.

And with that, the Buddha—there is a whole description of him entering the deep states of samadhi and inner well-being beyond the sick body that he was in—was released from this life.

Make of yourself a light. All things change. All things are impermanent. This is the truth. This is the reality. And you have within you this capacity to awaken, this gift, your own true nature. Trust it, practice with it, awaken in it, live in it—the great heart of compassion, the freedom that is who you really are.

And this is the end of the story. Once upon a time, as it began—this great myth—and then it ends with these words: that's how it was in the old days, and how it still is with us now.

I kind of feel like I do when I'm putting my grandson Desmond to sleep. He's three and a half years old, and I've told him a long fairy tale. And he says, "Baba, tell me some more." And I tell a little more of the fairy tale. And then he's smiling and he starts to get ready to go to sleep.

This is a beautiful story that's been told for 2,600 years. And part of what makes these myths and stories so important is that they speak to a part of our own heart and understanding—that reminds us of something outside of the events of politics and confusion and all the things that are happening in the world, which

we need to care for and tend to, just as this text started: to treat each other well, to listen and come together in harmony, to listen with respect and care for the vulnerable. We need to do all those things.

But then the Buddha says, here's a deeper invitation for you. Here's the mystery, because remember, it's not just the Buddha who's going to die, my dear friends. As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Me too. All of us.

So then in the end, what really matters? Yes, you tend, you love, you care. And you look deeply and see that you are the awakened one, that you are consciousness itself, you are loving awareness. And from this place of freedom and wellbeing and peace and compassion, you tend the world beautifully.

Oh, and by the way, Mara will visit you regularly. So as Thich Nhat Hanh said, you might as well invite him in for tea and say, "Oh, is that you, Mara, again?" "Oh my God, you see me! You know who I am." "Here's a little tea," says Thich Nhat Hanh. But he also says, let Mara have tea. Respect him. Say thank you for doing your job. But don't let him stay too long.

What part of this story caught your attention most? What place in the story do you feel like, "Oh yes, this reminded me, this was important, this touched me"? Because it is alive in you. And you can sense and know that.

Thank you for listening.

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