Seeing Anew

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 56:07

Let yourself settle and sit in a way that is comfortable to listen. You don't have to remember any of this. There's no quiz at the end. Rather, listen in a way that if something reminds you of a truth or what's important to your own heart, let that resonate in you—and the rest of it you can just let pass by.

First, again, Happy New Year to you. I'd like to talk tonight about renewal, about seeing with a renewed heart, seeing things in a fresh way.

I got a call some years ago from the editor of one of the women's magazines that you see on newsstands. I think it was Cosmo, but I'm not sure. She asked if I could write a little piece on New Year's resolutions, in particular on lasting change—how to make change last. I said, "Wait a second, you've called a Buddhist. We believe in change, not the lasting part. I'm sorry, you've dialed the wrong number."

When Zen Master Suzuki Roshi first came to San Francisco and began to teach, he famously talked about beginner's mind. Those of us who were interested in Buddhism back in those days—I think *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* came out maybe in 1969 or 1970—we were captivated by this teaching. I remember talking to my colleague and dear friend Sharon Salzberg. She was already practicing and meditating, training in a very wonderful way in India. Someone gave her the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, and she looked at it and said, "Oh, this is for beginners," and sort of tossed it aside. She didn't realize until sometime later when she read it that beautiful statement where Suzuki Roshi says the goal of meditation, the end point, the culmination, the fruition of practice, is to keep a beginner's mind.

So we begin with beginner's mind, and then if we're lucky, we deepen it or return to it in some wonderful way. Or as Marcel Proust says in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the real voyage of discovery is seeing where you are with new eyes.

That's the possibility for us: to step out of the habitual patterns of thought and perception, to step out of what's called the small sense of self—the body of fear, it's sometimes called—and to begin to see things in a fresh and new way.

There's a story about an old monastery, a Christian monastery that had fallen on hard times. It was one of those orders that used to have monasteries all over, but gradually it began to die out as people became more modern and less interested in the contemplative life. This was the father house, the main place. The other ones had closed. All that was left were five or six old monks, and they were afraid that with their passing, their whole contemplative order would die out.

They were sitting around one day with the abbot, talking about what they could do. The abbot said, "You

know, in the other part of the woods from where we are, there's a wise man, an old rabbi who lives there. Maybe I'll go over and ask for his advice."

So the abbot walked through the woods and paid his respects to the rabbi, whom he'd known for many years. They sat down and talked about how tough it was in the spiritual industry these days—how the world had become so much more materialistic, especially for contemplatives. Then the abbot asked, "Do you have any advice for us, to help us?"

The rabbi just wept. Some tears rolled down his cheeks. He said, "There's really nothing I can tell you, but I had this funny dream that the Messiah is there in your monastery. I don't know what it means, but I wish you well." And he sent him back.

So the abbot came back and they said, "What did the wise rabbi say?"

He said, "Well, we wept together. He had nothing really of value to say, except he had this funny dream that the Messiah was somehow in our monastery."

And they all began to ponder: What could this mean? They thought, could it mean the abbot? He's been their leader, and perhaps that's who it is. But on the other hand, it might have meant Brother Thomas, who was certainly a holy man, a man of light. It couldn't have meant Brother Elred—he gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in people's sides, when you look back, he's virtually always right. Maybe it's him. Maybe the rabbi meant he's the Messiah.

But surely not Brother Philip. He's so passive, a nobody. Of course, mysteriously, he does have a gift for somehow magically appearing by your side just when you need him. Maybe he's the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi couldn't have meant me.

He couldn't possibly mean me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet suppose he did. Suppose... suppose I am. Could I? Whatever.

And so they began to contemplate in this manner, and the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Now, the forest in which this monastery was situated was quite beautiful, and people occasionally came to visit and picnic on its little lawn and wander the paths. And as they did so in the year that followed, without being aware of it, they sensed this new aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and radiate out across the place. There was something strangely attractive about the way they were treating one another, something compelling. Hardly knowing why, people came back to play and picnic and show this place to others, to bring their friends. And then it happened that some of the younger men began to talk to the older monks, and after a while one asked if he could join, and then another. In a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order, thanks to the gift of the

rabbi.

So what does it mean to see the people that you live with, or the trees surrounding your home or your apartment, or the community that you live in, afresh and anew? And what does it mean to see those that you live with and treat them with this kind of dignity and respect? And to treat yourself as well with that kind of dignity and respect?

One of the beautiful things in both the Buddhist teachings and in all these neuroscience studies that have been done in the last decades is that it turns out to be possible to step out of the blinders of our ordinary perception and see in a fresh way, to see anew. To step out of the fear and anxiety and prejudice and all of the things that blind us, and instead to see with eyes of understanding and with a beginner's mind.

There is a kind of shift of identity that begins to happen as you sit in meditation. Instead of being the thoughts and the worries and the plans and the tingles and itches and pain in your body and the various emotions of sad and happy and so forth, you become the witnessing of it. You become the loving awareness that says, "Oh yes, here are these thoughts, and here are these views and opinions, and here are the ways that I experience this body and mind." And when you look, you start to see that who you are isn't so rigid or fixed, that you can actually look anew at your very own mind and your very own life. And to live in a wise way, you really have to do that.

I've got a few passages from this new book that I'm just finishing on inner freedom.

Sarah, a single mom with two kids, found out that her eight-year-old daughter Alicia had a serious form of leukemia. She was terrified, anxious, grieving. For the first year, they went through long rounds of chemotherapy, hospital stays, doctors. A fearful sadness filled the house, and anxiety colored Sarah's days. And then one afternoon, out on a walk, Alicia said, "I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I want them to be happy days."

It was a splash of cold water on her mother's face. Sarah had to step out of the fearful melodrama and meet her daughter's freedom with her own, to return to a trusting spirit. Sarah grabbed her daughter and did a little waltz, holding her tight, and she felt herself let go. And in time, Alicia healed. She's now twenty-two, just graduated college. But even if she hadn't, what kind of days would you have her choose? You can't do that much with your life if you're miserable, after all. You might as well be happy.

So it's possible to renew and to start again. And as we sit, we begin to learn this in a kind of visceral and immediate way. We learn, for example, the ability to forgive—to see the resentments and the sufferings and the betrayals. Anybody in this room been betrayed? Don't bother to raise your hand. It's like human incarnation. We've been betrayed and we've been hurt by others. And not only that—anybody in this room hurt anybody else, ever? Never mind, don't raise your hand.

And instead of living in shame and guilt, and instead of living in anger and hatred and resentment, you begin to realize that that's not the way you want to tend your heart. It's not what you want to hold on to.

And you begin to let things go and start anew. There are all these beautiful practices of forgiveness that we teach here, and you're welcome to listen to the various online teachings or read books on those practices. You do them over and over, and gradually they change you.

So you start again with forgiveness. Everybody needs to learn it. We all have things to forgive and to ask forgiveness for.

And then you have to learn how to let go. My teacher Ajahn Chah said if you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll be a lot happy. If you let go completely, things will be easy for you. And I don't think he meant in letting go that you didn't have courage or dignity or care about things. But he meant the letting go of your views about how the world should be. Because it's just not that way. Sorry.

If in the last few years you haven't discarded a major opinion or acquired a new one, please check your pulse. You may have died. We are needing to renew ourselves.

And both with forgiveness and letting go, what you also learn in meditation is how to be present with your particular measure of suffering. Anybody not have a measure of suffering? Again, you can raise your hands and you can have your eight dollars back. We have this kind of irrational belief that pain can be avoided, that suffering can be avoided. Praise and blame, gain and loss.

One of the things that happens as we learn to meditate, and there grows this deepening sense of inner freedom, is that you grow in your capacity to bear witness to the suffering of life as well as to its beauty. When Martin Luther King said we will match your physical force with soul force, he spoke about a spirit in human beings that can see and allow ourselves to be touched by the sufferings of life and not drown in it, not have it take us over, because our spirit becomes strong in our capacity of compassion and presence.

So letting go doesn't mean that you don't have difficulties. In fact, I think in some way you actually become more aware of them as your spiritual practice deepens. And they teach you in a different way because you don't turn your gaze from the world. You see its tainted glory, its unbearable beauty, and its ocean of tears. And you become someone who's engaged and connected with the world because you have this capacity.

I remember when I was eight or nine years old. We were living in Buffalo, New York, and it was midwinter, so the snow was forty feet high or whatever it is. Buffalo gets a lot of snow. It was a blizzard with icy cold wind, and we all bundled up—my twin brother and I and my other brothers—to go out and play. I was skinny as a rail and shivering out there. And my twin brother looked at me and said, "It's not that cold." Wind chill was probably fifteen below or something. He said, "It's not that cold." He took off his hat and started laughing. He took off his scarf and started laughing. He said, "It's not that cold." Then he took off his jacket and started laughing. He took off his sweater. He took off his shirt, and there he is half naked, just dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold."

It was a great moment. I've remembered it my whole life. I told him about it years later—he didn't even

remember it. But it touched me in some really important way. He's somebody who has a very free spirit, and I learned something in that moment from him: that you can be present for the way things are and your spirit can be free. Or to put it another way, even in the midst of the sufferings of life, you can love anyway. You can forgive, you can let go of how it's supposed to be, and you sit and you practice and you love anyway.

So another story, and this is of Alvaro, whose father died. He had six siblings, and they fought. Some of them lied, greedy to get control of the family construction company. In two years, they nearly robbed Alvaro of his inheritance. But they were his family.

Parents of his beloved nieces and nephews, he'd been with them at every family gathering—weddings, holidays. Family was his life. And he realized he had to learn to live through broken trust, to find some deeper trust. After a year, he realized he could only trust them to be themselves. But he didn't want them to colonize his heart. He told his lawyer to use every legal means to protect his inheritance, but he would not give up loving them. By seeing them clearly, he regained a trust in himself, and through sometimes legally painful battles, he learned he could care for himself and trust in a new and wiser way.

There's something in sitting about learning how to trust yourself—your experience, and more than that, your capacity to be present for this human life that you've been given.

What helps? Here we are, living in a time in which we're fed the images and difficulties of the world—the continuing warfare, the racism, the environmental destruction. And yet, and yet, that's not the whole game. Because the world is also marvelous and beautiful and renewing itself. And people—there are a thousand acts of goodness probably for every act of cruelty. But they don't get measured, and they certainly don't get reported in the news.

So one of the things that helps is to set your intentions. Last month when we sat together in December, we did New Year's vows, Bodhisattva vows. Those of you who were here, we took time to reflect on what vows or intention we would want to use to set the direction of our heart. And I read some traditional vows. In Zen you sit and recite: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." It's a very formal kind of vow-taking. And as I mentioned, sentient beings often don't want to be saved by you—but that's a whole other thing, especially the ones in your family. But it has a much deeper meaning. The meaning is that you vow to bring your goodness and your wisdom and your dignity and your blessings and your creativity to this world. That you vow to meet each experience or each person with compassion. And then it doesn't matter how many beings there are—all of them get met in that way.

People made their vows, and sometimes they were very simple ones. "My vow is to be kind to myself and others." Or, "My vow is to carry peace in a world where they're trying to get me to be afraid." Or, "My vow is to see beauty in every being that I meet, every person I encounter, every place I go." Those are pretty cool vows.

What was interesting in the years I lived in the Buddhist monastery is that we had to renew our vows every two weeks. We didn't wait for the calendar year to come around and say, "Oh yeah, made those New Year's resolutions, got about midway through January, and that was it." After two weeks you would meet and recite your vows again, acknowledge that you had broken them or hadn't fulfilled them so well, and then take them anew with someone as witness. It was a really beautiful ritual. It was the renewing that said we can start again. It is never too late to begin again.

So forgiveness, letting go, loving anyway—and with the vow, we start to set an intention to see the world in a different way. It's as if we carry an image: I could live with peace in my heart no matter where I go, or I could live with kindness toward myself and whomever I meet, or see beauty wherever I am.

As most of you know, in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the master poet Dante wrote this amazing work called The Divine Comedy. The entire Divine Comedy was inspired by Beatrice, by a single moment of love. It began when Dante was in Florence, standing near the Ponte Vecchio, this amazing medieval bridge that crosses the Arno River. It was just before 1300, and Dante saw this young woman, Beatrice, standing on the bridge. He was a young man, she a little younger, and she touched his heart. She ignited in him a vision that contained all of eternity. He didn't speak to her, and he saw her very little; then he spoke to her a bit, and then she died in the plague. Dante was stricken with loss, and she'd become somehow the carrier of some spirit, the bridge from his heart to something eternal. His whole work of the Divine Comedy was inspired by that moment of seeing her on the bridge.

Now, 650 years later, during World War II, the American army was moving up the Italian peninsula and the German army was retreating. The Germans were blowing up everything, including the bridges across the various rivers, to stop the Americans' progress. But no one wanted to blow up Ponte Vecchio because Beatrice had stood on it, and Dante had written about her. So the leaders of the German army made radio contact with the Americans, and in plain language they said they would leave Ponte Vecchio intact if the Americans would promise not to use it for their troops. And the promise held. The bridge was not blown up, and not one American soldier or piece of equipment crossed it. The bridge was spared in a modern, ruthless war because Beatrice had stood on it and Dante had fallen in love.

There's some way in each of us—you can remember the day you fell in love, on a spring day with the crocuses and the plum blossoms, or on an autumn day with that crisp smell of burning leaves, and you met your Beatrice or your Brent, whoever he or she was. And if you never fell in love because of the sufferings of your life, as Rumi says, today is a good day to start.

But there's something about remembering that your heart has been that open and that touched. And again, it inspires, it becomes part of the vow or the vision. I vow to live in this way in this world, to move through the world in this way. And it gives you a bigger picture of things.

Another story from this new book. This is about a woman. I started to collect these stories because I asked people about freedom, and I received all these letters and accounts.

Whitney went back to St. Louis because her mom was scheduled for hip surgery and her father was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. She wanted her parents to stay at home, but with each stage of their disability, it got harder and harder. Her brother, who lived nearby, was not involved at all. He wanted his sisters to help take care of it. You know how that happens in families.

So she took a leave from work. The house was in shambles, her father couldn't care for himself well, and her mom's fracture obviously was going to take a long time to heal. She knew they couldn't stay there. So she walked up the hillside she'd known growing up, and she wept. She didn't want to lose her childhood home. She wanted her parents to have their wish of staying there till the end. And she didn't want to lose her parents.

When she reached the top of the hill and opened her eyes, she sat as she had in meditation. And then she looked and saw the vast Midwestern fields stretched to the horizon, the sky filled with cumulus clouds, and the many small houses clustered at the edge of the town. Instinctively, she felt less alone. She could sense how everything had its seasons—arriving and departing, flourishing and struggling, coming into being, fading away. How many people, she wondered, are in the same predicament even this day in America, in Canada, in Europe, across the world?

As she breathed with more ease, her mind opened further. I'm not the only one with aging parents. And as the space opened, her heart settled. She felt more trust. And she realized: we can do this.

So meditation isn't really about having a goal of a particular state, although calm comes, well-being can come, joy and light can come at times. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's restless or lonely or anxious—all the kinds of emotions that we might struggle with arise. And that's all good. It's not that you're supposed to have a particular experience.

But what happens as you sit is that things begin to settle, and you realize that you're actually not in control. Who's in control of their mind here? Tell it not to think. All right, no more thought. I want you to stop thinking. Does it listen? It has a mind of its own. Or how about your emotions? I only want to have happy, positive emotions. Does your heart listen to that? Come on.

And you start to see that who you are is a river—a river of thoughts and perceptions and feelings, some of them healthier, some of them more destructive or unhealthy. But they're all changing, unstable, insecure. You sit and you also notice that no matter what you do, you can't have all pleasure and no pain. You can't have all gain and no loss. You can't have all praise and no blame. The world is woven with these opposites. Praise and blame come. Pleasure and pain. Gain and loss come. And you start to realize it is the way that it is.

And then there comes the realization that all the feelings and thoughts is not exactly who you are. I talk about this often because I like the image. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged. Face it. Wrinkles, drooping, turning gray, no fur left at all. All the kind of stuff. As Wes Nisker, my dear colleague

and friend, says, the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard. But the weird thing is that you don't feel older.

There you are looking in the mirror. You know that experience? And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body exists in time as an infant and a young child and a teenager and a young person, and it grows up middle-aged and older and so forth. But the one who knows, the witness of it, is awareness itself, is consciousness. And that doesn't exist in time.

And so as you sit, you begin to rest not in the manipulation of experience—although you can use your breath to quiet things—but you become more and more the witness of experience. You become what my teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows." You become loving awareness that says, "Oh, here's a happy thought, and there's a frightened thought, and here's this emotion that's delicious, and here's one that's deliciously awful." And you begin to sense all these things not as something you have to react to, but with a greater sense of spaciousness—like Whitney found on the hillside. There's a greater sense of presence and an ability to know that life is renewing itself in every breath, in every moment, and who you are is the witness to this game and this dance.

And so you can choose and guide yourself through it in skillful ways, but you don't get so lost and reactive and caught in it, because you say, "Ah, it's always going to renew itself in some new form." There grows a very deep trust—a trust not in the experience itself, but in the capacity of your heart to bear witness to it all with love and presence.

And when you meet somebody who's wise, that's kind of how they are. They say, "Yeah, this is how it is, the human incarnation. How's it going in there?" And you go, "Yeah, that's right. It's got its measure of sorrows and its measure of beauty."

A friend of mine who had practiced yoga and then done some kundalini yoga when she was in her late teens—eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—very avidly, got pregnant pretty young. She went into the hospital to have her first child, and she ended up being left alone part of the time, just the way it was back in those days—the late fifties or sixties, probably. Yoga was just becoming fashionable.

She was in long labor, and there was a lot of pain, as there often is in labor. She was somewhat frightened and didn't know what to do. She tried to do her yoga practice, did more breathing and so forth, which helped a little bit, but mostly it was just overwhelming. And then she said, all of a sudden something else happened. She said, "I felt this force like the kundalini or something just take over my body. And my body began to move with the contractions. And all of a sudden it wasn't my body."

She said this wild thing happened. "I became all the mothers of the world. I was there all by myself, and I realized it wasn't me, this person, giving birth to someone else. I became the world giving birth to itself, and I was all the women who'd ever had children, all the beings who'd birthed new beings out of their body." She said, "I realized that it wasn't personal to me at all, that I was part of some enormous life force

that moved and lived through me."

And then she said, "I gave birth to this beautiful son, and then the kundalini kind of filled my body, and I was filled with light and I was trembling." And the doctor said, "What's the matter with you?" And they gave her a bunch of valium to kind of get rid of it. Because that's what they did in those days. Sorry about your kundalini, lady.

But the truth is that we know this. We know that there is a bigger game than your checkbook or your to-do list or the things that you have to manage. And you have to pay attention to them and take care with them with some impeccability and dignity. But that's not really what life is about. Yes, you have to serve and work in different ways. But you're also invited to have a free spirit.

And that's really the invitation of the Buddha. He said that all of these teachings are to offer what he called the sure heart's release—this capacity to be free in your being and in your spirit with praise and blame and gain and loss and pleasure and pain, all the things that make up human incarnation. To say, "Yes, this is so, and here we are. Isn't this amazing and beautiful?" And then you bring blessings where you are.

I had a friend who just came back from doing the three-month retreat that we have held annually for the last forty years at our center on the East Coast, Insight Meditation Society—just like we have an annual two-month retreat here for the last fifteen or sixteen years or more. People will come. For those of you who've never done a daylong or a week, it may sound crazy—and it is a little bit—but...

People will come, a whole group of them this winter. They'll be starting in a few weeks. There will be close to a hundred people who come in silence for two months to sit and meditate and be present.

One practitioner wrote about his experience. He said, "In the beginning I sat, and for the first few weeks there was a lot of pain. All the stored tension I carried in my body and the conflicts of the year—they all played out. And I just sat with them." Then eventually they released, and his mind became clear, like Ajahn Chah's description of a clear forest pool. And many rare and wonderful animals came and went, but he was still. He was the vast stillness of the pool.

He said that after a time, while resting in this state of presence, a deep compassion arose, as if Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, came—not as a person, but as a kind of inner strength, like an enormous cosmic tree. And he realized that compassion doesn't alleviate or take away pain. Rather, it gives us the strength to endure it. Kuan Yin is an energy provided out of compassion to help us make the long, difficult, painful journey of return to our own true nature. And the bodhisattvas and beings who serve the world are Kuan Yin's foot soldiers—beings who are little towers of strength and lend their care to others who are suffering.

He stayed in compassion as a practice for some two weeks, and then somehow it died away and he touched the place of stillness that the Buddha speaks of—profound calm and contentment and wisdom, a kind of peace in the midst of all things. He saw all the difficulties and trials and tribulations and afflictions

of his own life and others, not as mistakes, but as opportunities for the heart to learn how to be truly free. That was really what his life was about. And he began to rest and trust more and more the stream of pure awareness outside of time, no beginning and no end.

Now, you listen to that and say, "Okay, well, that's nice. He had a good retreat." But I have to go to work tomorrow, and I've never done a day, or maybe I did a week, but it lasted for a while. I had that nice Vipassana facelift afterward—I felt just glorious for about three weeks, and then I got a call from my ex-husband and it all went away, or whatever.

But it's not really about retreat. It's about reminding us of something we know that's so true—that no matter what happens to you, no matter the circumstances of your life, you can return to this place of knowing, to become the one who knows. And we need it in these times, because things conspire in the culture around us to make us forget who we really are—to become consumers, or to become politicized, or to lose connection with our own deepest values.

This is from the poet Robert Frost. It was written a while ago, but it seems rather au courant. He says, "There's absolutely no reason for being rushed along with the rush." Isn't that a great line? There's absolutely no reason for being rushed along with the rush. Everyone should be free to go very slow. What you're hanging around in the world for is for something mysterious to occur for you.

He's inviting intuition, mystery, not to go along with the rush even though the rush is there. "Everyone should be free to go very slow." What a line. Of course, he was a poet—he'd sit around and write poetry lines. But when you come to meditation, or when you sit at home and you start to quiet the mind and soften the heart, this gives you the ability, the practice, to begin to see things in a new way.

And you need a practice, for most of us anyway, because the speed and intensity of our own thoughts and the world—driving and traveling and tending and being online nineteen hours a day and all the rest of it—can take you over. So a practice of just being with your breath, or a practice of the body scan, of moving your attention through your body and relaxing each part as you do. Or the practices we did of becoming the loving awareness and naming what arises: "There is worry. There is planning mind. There is doubt. Oh, and there's creativity. And there's a little bit of sadness or regret—thank you for noticing me. There's judgment—thank you for your opinion."

You start to notice the experiences, and as you do, you can also notice your reactions to them—your judgments, your fears, all of that. And more and more you become able to become the loving awareness itself, the witnessing of it that says, "Yes, this is part of being human. This is part of being human."

Going back to the story of the Buddha's awakening: on the night of his enlightenment, as most everybody knows from this famous story, the Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree and was attacked by Mara. Mara is the name for the Indian god who represents greed, hatred, ignorance, death, and delusion. Each time that Mara came to the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha remained unmoved

and simply said, "I see you, Mara." At which point Mara threw up his hands at being recognized, skulked away, and then came in a new form—sometimes as temptation, sometimes as aggression, sometimes as doubt or worry.

In some later accounts, the Buddha even invited his old friend Mara to come back for tea once they'd kind of gotten through their relationship difficulties.

Mara appeared to Emily in the form of shame and confusion. Whenever money was tight or work was difficult, whenever she gained a couple of pounds or her ex-boyfriend called, Mara would attack her. It was a familiar pattern. From childhood, Emily held a sense that something was wrong with her. *I'm not charming enough, not good-looking, not smart or creative or fast enough.* The list went on and on.

Gradually, through her practice of mindfulness and loving awareness, Emily gained a more spacious perspective and was able to see Mara clearly. To do this, she first learned to feel her ever-changing breath, to witness her body's aches and pains with some equanimity and kindness. Then she learned to sit and be curious about the different states that visited her mind and heart. She learned to name them as the Buddha had: *Oh Mara, oh despair, oh shame. Is that you again? I see you.* What an amazing thing to be able to say. And then she learned to compassionately decline their grasp. *Even if you want to have tea, I can't let you stay too long because I have another engagement. Sorry.*

You begin to get a sense from that very simple account of your own freedom of heart—that you can be the witness to your fears or confusions, or in her case the shame or anxiety, and say, "Oh, yes, is that you again, Mara? Thank you for your opinion, your dance. Here's a little tea. Now I've got better things to do. Thank you." You don't want to struggle against it, because that's Mara itself. Instead, you become bigger. You become the loving awareness. And you become part of the whole.

Because as you get quiet, as the mind quiets and the heart softens, you start to feel that you're not separate from the world anymore. Your family and your community, the environment that we know so well, the air we breathe, the water that we drink—it's all a part of our body, a part of us. It turns out the earth is your body. This is just a little piece of your body that you tend to claim as your own. And Mother Teresa said, "The trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small." This whole world is your family. In most traditional cultures, they know that. They use all those honorifics of uncle and auntie and grandmother—it would be Uncle Barack and Auntie Hillary, Grandfather Bernie. And I don't know what you would say about Donald. We all have one in our family. We just say that. But they're respected as part of our extended human family. It's the way that it works.

Now, the way that politics is going, they want to sell you on terror and anxiety. That's how politics has pretty much always worked—make people afraid and then they'll support the dictator or the politician or whoever is going to keep them safe. But of course, life is more mysterious and uncertain than that. When you become comfortable with change and uncertainty, when you become comfortable taking your seat in the middle of your human incarnation just as you are—with the joys and sorrows, with your blessings and

capacities, with your struggles—and you become the witness of it, you become the loving awareness, then whole different capacities open in you. You feel fulfilled. You're not always looking to be loved or admired, because you admire yourself and you love yourself. You value yourself and you value others.

I remember reading Krishnamurti years ago. He had all these highfalutin things about the nature of consciousness and mind. It was kind of cool, but sometimes a little hard to understand. He was sometimes a bit of a scold—"You should understand, but you don't." Come on, Krishnamurti, give me a break. But the passage that really stuck out for me, when he talked about awakening, he said: if you're going along the road and there's a big stone in the road, even if you can avoid it, you move it over to the side. Because it's not your road—it's our road.

I took that to heart. I read that when I was maybe nineteen. In fact, even when I'm driving, if there's something dangerous in the road, I pull over if I possibly can and get it out of the road—partly in honor of what I read, but also partly as a symbol of what I'm learning, which is to care for us, to care for our family.

And so you get quiet, and then what else is there to do? Some of these people are hungry—you feed them. There's injustice—you do what you can to alleviate it.

I remember last month I was talking about all the migrants and refugees, which we may well be seeing more of, and the fears that people are trying to put into your mind about immigrants and refugees. I asked how many people would be willing to consider, if you could, taking a Syrian refugee—a child or a woman—into your own home. And half the hands went up. Thank you, everybody whose hands went up, those of you who are here tonight. Because that's what happens. You get quiet, and there comes to you a sense of belonging that's different than the desire and the struggle. There comes in the sitting a sense of connection with your own inner dignity and well-being, and with that sense of vastness of time, stepping out of time. And then you tend the world. And you don't do it just because you're supposed to, or it's a good bodhisattva thing to do, or you feel worried.

I've told this story quite a few times in the last couple of years. Wes Nisker, colleague and friend who teaches here, went to interview Gary Snyder—the great poet, Pulitzer Prize–winning environmentalist, author of *Earth House Hold*, a truly great icon of the American environmental movement, who's now eighty-four. Wes said, "Gary, you now see the environmental destruction, the loss of species, the problems with the rising ocean, climate change. What advice do you have for us at this time?" And Gary looked back and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt or anger. Those are the things that actually made the problem. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it."

And love is really the only force that's big enough to counter the forces of greed and hatred and ignorance in the world. It's the force that allows mothers to lift cars off their children. It's that great capacity of the heart.

Friends of mine were recently in Dharamsala this past fall, and there was a special gathering—they

helped to arrange it—with Archbishop Tutu from South Africa and the Dalai Lama. They were spending a week together doing a dialogue to create a book on joy. If you've ever seen Tutu, he laughs a lot. He has this kind of giggle, and he's totally wonderful. And of course, I think people go to see the Dalai Lama mostly to hear him laugh. Yes, those nice Tibetan teachings and so forth, but really—the laughter. Annie Lamott, our local wonderful writer and humorist, says laughter is carbonated holiness. And the people who were there in Dharamsala said these two were like kids. They set each other off and they giggled and laughed through a good part of that whole week of teachings on happiness.

This is the invitation: that you become the steward of your own heart in a wise way, that you train and practice what it means to stay present. So that when Mara visits—and Mara is kind of amazing, he gets around, ancient India no problem, modern San Francisco, wherever you live, here he is—when Mara comes, you can say, "Oh, I see you, Mara," and not get lost in the fear and the confusion and the suffering.

This is not to say that there doesn't need to be tenderness and healing for us, that we have traumas that need care, that there are pains that really need to be tended to. But that's not the end of the story. The First Noble Truth of the Buddha's teaching is that life has suffering in it, so you can't make it perfect, without pain or suffering. But that's the beginning of the story. The Second Noble Truth is that there's a cause to it, and the Third Noble Truth is that there's an end to it. And the end to it is really the freedom of spirit and freedom of heart—your own joy. Carbonated holiness.

And you have this in you. You have seeds of beauty. You have undeniable dignity, dignity that you were born with, that cannot be taken from you. You have a fundamental goodness that was born in you, and an innocence that can't be taken, that's inviolable in the human spirit.

And so we meditate not to become good meditators or to have experiences, although those come and they're wonderful, but really to learn this deeper trust, this capacity to be present with a loving heart and with wisdom.

So let's do a little meditation together, just for a few minutes, a little reflection. As you sit quietly, I'll ask you a few simple questions: What in your life wants to, or needs to, be held in compassion? What in your life wants forgiveness? What in your life is it time to let go of?

What in your life asks for your courage? And what in your life brings beauty and joy?

It's beautiful just to stop and reflect. Because when you listen, the heart actually will answer. And it's never too late. The heart is always waiting for you to ask and listen. Never too late to start again.

I'd like us to end with a very simple chant before we go out into the delicious rainy evening.

I do want to thank the volunteers. We have a really beautiful crew of volunteers, some of whom have been doing this for years and years with a lot of care and love. Some are newer. I'm very, very grateful to you all.

So here is the chant we'll do. In India, when you meet someone, the most common greeting is to put your hands together and say *namaste*, which means "I honor the divine within you. I see who you really are." Not the cloak of your body and garments and roles and all of that, but the spirit behind those eyes. I see who you really are.

The root of that word *namaste* in Sanskrit is the word *namo*, which means to pay respects or bow to. And so I'd like us to chant *namo* nine times. As you do, you can feel in yourself what it is that needs to be bowed to with respect. It might be beautiful things. It might be Mara coming, and you saying, "Oh yeah, I see you." It might be something in the world that you want to offer your loving respect to. We'll chant it nine times and then go out into the damp evening, the blessed rain.

Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo. Namo.

And may you carry the stillness of the temple and the remembrance of the heart—anything that was of value and touched you tonight. Carry this and bring it back to bring blessings wherever you go.

Thank you so much for coming. Good night.

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