Monday Night Class Dharma Talk - Nobility and Love

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:08:10

So please let yourself come back in and get settled.

It's a pleasure to be back. I'm now teaching Monday nights once a month after sabbatical. I was partly turning seventy and thinking, I want time to do other things as well, but it's still always a treat to come back here. This last month has been about putting finishing touches on a new book, which of course takes about a year for the publishers to get out, but for me it was very good to deliver it and have it finished. There have been weddings, funerals, and things in between. That's how it is in this human incarnation, isn't it?

For those of you who haven't come before, the teachings are not so much something you are called on to remember—no quiz at the end or anything like that. More importantly, they're a reminder at best of something that you already know and already carry in your own heart. When it touches you in that way and reminds you, beautiful. And if it doesn't seem helpful, then let it go.

In the same way, you could feel in the sitting we just did, especially those of you who are newer to mindfulness practice, that the focus isn't on having a particular experience or being able to concentrate on your breath or achieving some particular goal. The focus is actually to become present, to quiet yourself a little bit, to open your heart, and to listen to what's happening in your own body and your own mind and all of the stories and relationships and things that make up your life. They reveal themselves in that loving awareness.

Today is President's Day. Back in the hoary times when I was young, we had Washington's birthday and Lincoln's birthday as separate holidays. Now, for efficiency, they've combined them somehow. But it was actually much more charming to have them separate because you got to reflect on those particular presidents and leaders.

One of the stories I most love about George Washington is that after his time in the presidency, there were many people who wanted him to become king. I don't know if you know that history, but there was a lot of pressure. Basically, it was part of everybody's psyche at the time—democracy was quite new and unfamiliar. The thinking was: we got freedom from the King of England, now we need a new king. You're a magnificent guy, you've been president, why don't you just finish it and become king? One of George Washington's greatest acts as president was refusing to become king and instead saying, no, this is a new experiment here in this particular form—a lot of it actually came from the Iroquois Nation, the Iroquois

Confederacy. He retired to Mount Vernon and said, elect the next president. So thank you, George Washington.

And then Lincoln's birthday. When I go to Washington, D.C. periodically, I try to visit the memorials there. They move me deeply—to go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and touch that long black wall and the names on it. And to go into the Lincoln Memorial, which always brings me to tears.

There, above that huge statue of Lincoln seated, it says: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." It's built as a mirror of a Greek temple. You feel that you're entering a sacred place, a holy place. On one side, engraved, is the Gettysburg Address that you all had to learn—at least in my generation—by heart. On the other side is text inscribed in marble from portions of his second inaugural address, which he gave not many months before he was assassinated, when the Civil War was still raging.

It has these words: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." I think about Syria and Lebanon and Libya and Yemen and the various places where there's war. Fondly do we hope and fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

"Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

And then finally, the words end in this closing of reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Really extraordinary words and extraordinary leadership.

I think about the national conversation that's happening now—Black Lives Matter, racism, diversity—and then go back to this, 150 years ago, saying: if we suffer, if the war continues until every drop of blood drawn with the lash is paid by another drawn by the sword, so we will do it. What an amazing thing to say. There's a sense of justice in his words and a kind of integrity in the midst of unbearable suffering. That is real leadership.

When we celebrate President's Day—as it is now, with President's Day sales in the stores—there really is a reason for it if we let ourselves go back to this part of who we are as a people on this particular part of the earth.

It resonates like the teachings of the Buddha, because of course the dilemma of racism and the suffering that Lincoln spoke of is not over. The Buddha said that the Dharma, the teachings of awakening and compassion, welcome all who are interested in awakening. The Dharma gates are open for you. Whatever your race, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your ability, whatever you look like, whatever your birth—as the Buddha says, not by birth, nor caste, nor race, nor creed, none of those things makes a human being noble, but solely the nobility of heart. For those who wish to join this path of awakening and nobility, please come and be part of this. Let us change the way human beings live. Let's change the world.

So many Buddhist texts begin with the words "O nobly born," which is a reminder of who you really are. There's a beautiful poem by William Stafford with a line that says maybe if you were exchanged in the cradle and no one told you what your parentage is, you sit quietly and wonder—maybe you're a queen, maybe you're a king.

This quality of nobility that Lincoln carried, and Washington did in refusing to be the king, is really the quality of wise leadership. I'm talking about it because it's President's Day, but also because you're all leaders. You might be a leader in your family or in your community or with your friends, but we all have at times the role of leadership. It's part of what's given to us in the human incarnation. And what's possible in leadership is the ability to bring what we train in meditation practice—loving awareness, compassion, the balance of mindfulness, generosity of spirit—to those around you.

Last spring when I went to the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering and was able to give the summary talk to White House staff and folks from the State Department, I noted that the Buddha in his time was actually quite conversant with and spent time with the leadership around him. There are all these texts and stories of his teachings to ministers and kings and princes, wealthy courtesans, movers and shakers of his time.

One of the most beautiful texts is the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, where the Buddha says: if a nation or society comes together in harmony, listens to one another in harmony and departs in harmony; if they treat all members of society with respect; if they protect those who are vulnerable—children, women, those who are older, those who are sick; if they tend the teachings of their ancestors and elders that carry wisdom; and if they tend the natural environment around them—then they can be expected to prosper and not decline. All these teachings on wise leadership.

There's a whole text in which the Buddha speaks about the nobility of our human capacity to lead those around us in a wise way. And because he was a list maker—he liked to make lists, so there are a zillion Buddhist lists: the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the twelve nidanas, the fifty-two mental factors, the Four Noble Truths, the five spiritual faculties, the three characteristics—he talks about leadership in times of change. Anybody notice what times we're living in?

It was the great chemist Lavoisier who said: nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed. This is the essence of chemical equations—you take things and they get combined, moved, changed

around. Everything is transformed. This is the reality of our human incarnation: everything is being transformed, including our own thoughts and feelings, body and mind, the culture and the global environment we live in.

So how do we navigate in this change? Wise leadership, in this particular list, the Buddha says, starts with generosity—a generous heart. A generous leader, imagine that. Then it includes uprightness, which is an older, more Victorian word for integrity. Wise leadership, your work as a leader wherever you are, asks for generosity and integrity. It also asks for non-harming—that part of integrity is to not cause harm to yourself or others. Steadiness. Sacrifice—isn't that interesting? There's something noble about being able to put your own needs and desires in a greater context, to say what really matters is that I offer this to the whole. Flexibility—the Buddha says being flexible and not rigid. Patience. Inclusiveness—the wise leader doesn't lead alone but gathers others around them, like Lincoln did. You know that beautiful book, *Team of Rivals*, in which Lincoln took the people who were his political adversaries and put them all into his cabinet. He said, "I need you to help me figure out what to do in this Civil War time, and we can't be fighting one another." An inclusive kind of leadership. And then the vision and trust that goes with that vision.

The beautiful thing—which I said at the White House as well—is not that these are good ideals or good ideas. They are. So what? The Greeks had them, the African kings had them, the Maya had them. Whoever it is around the world, we can find them. The important thing is that they can be trained, that they can be awakened in us, which is really why we do these remarkable practices of compassion and mindfulness and equanimity.

Each one of these qualities actually leads to a practice. Generosity can be a practice. One of my practices with generosity, which I've done for twenty-five, thirty years, is that if I have a generous thought to give something or to serve or to do something for someone, I do it. Because you have that nice thought—"Oh yeah, I should do this," or "Wouldn't that be great to give that"—and then immediately comes all those little people that live inside that say, "Oh, you know, that's going to be a lot of trouble," or "You might need that," or "That's too much," or "You've got other things to do." Do you know those voices? Do you have them? Yes, you do. I know you do. I know you. Because we're human.

But the practice—it's a really beautiful one—is when that generous impulse arises, I just say, okay, I'll do it. There might be a few exceptions, and I don't judge myself, but mostly for the last thirty years when that impulse has come, I've done it, and I never regret it. The beautiful thing is not just that this nobility and dignity is some ideal thing, but that it's something you can practice and deepen and learn.

Now it turns out, since we're not only talking about President's Day but Valentine's Day, that love too can be practiced and awakened. The modern neuroscience research on social and emotional learning for young children, empathy training, the work done at Yale and the CASEL Consortium—all kinds of studies show that kids three, four, five, six years old have naturally generous impulses as well as naturally violent

impulses. "Don't hit her with a block. Use your words," right? Except that we really want to tell that to Bashar al-Assad and Putin. The kindergartners get it. Can't we get those older people to figure this out?

It turns out there is a natural empathy in kids. The Yale studies show that infants who are pre-verbal, less than a year old—by watching their eyes tracking and their responses—they get upset if there's a crying child, if something is missing or taken away. If someone drops something, they want to help that person pick it up. There is an innate connection between us as human beings. I mean, there you were in somebody's belly, after all. Let's get real about this. Isn't that weird? You lived in somebody's belly. "Oh, I'm independent." Yeah, right. Give me a break. You lived in someone else's body. It's really wild.

So these things—empathy, love, compassion—can also be trained and awakened. They're not ideals. They are really the wedding of something magnificent, like Lincoln's words, to something that's really personal and intimate.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote this beautiful book on love. You read his books, and he's managed somehow to take, in some cases, very complicated and rather profound Dharma teachings and simplify them so that you can't deny them. They're just so beautiful.

So I get this new Thich Nhat Hanh book. I want to read it partly because I love his teaching, partly because I want to steal stories or whatever I can from it—a little professional grab there. I'm reading, and it's going to be about love and compassion and sympathetic joy and so forth, the Brahma Viharas, the Buddhist teachings on the awakened heart. It's fine, it's beautiful. And then I turn the page to chapter two, and it begins: "She was just nineteen years old when I saw her first walk down the stairs in that temple in Chu Lai"—in Vietnam.

This book of teachings on love, it turns out, were teachings that Thich Nhat Hanh gave to his community in Plum Village some years ago. I can picture everybody sitting there hearing Thich Nhat Hanh speak about the Brahma Viharas and the awakened heart and the Buddha's teachings on love. And then he pauses and says, "She was just nineteen when I saw her walk down the stairs." All of a sudden—it was in France too—everybody sits up. "Ooh, now this is something I really want to hear."

The book has a love story in every other chapter. Not love that was consummated, because he was a monk and she was a nun, and in this case they behaved. Not always true, but in their case they were. But it talks about his own personal love for this young woman—he was young too—and what that meant to him. There's something so beautiful because it weds what we really long for: that wedding of the personal, to really love another or others, and at the same time to have that love open us to something greater.

And again, I'm somehow, even as I say these words, still back with those words of Abraham Lincoln. I can't help it, because they're so compelling. And there's some way in his leadership that it was really a leadership of love. There was a nobility and a dignity to it. He was somehow tuned into a kind of love that in the midst of the fire of the Civil War still carried some deeper capacity for human beings to live in a

different way.

And so here's Thich Nhat Hanh writing about it, and you can't help but want to turn the page. The scent of love—Rumi talks about love dogs, their tails start wagging as soon as a little love is in the room.

And I'm so happy because at age seventy, in these last years since I was divorced, I am in a relationship with Trudy Goodman, who's a colleague and teacher I've known for years and years. And I got to fall in love again in my late sixties. And it's been totally wonderful.

We realized that at seventy—we're five weeks apart in age, so we had our seventieth birthday—and we said, we don't know how much time we have. Of course, nobody does, actually. But as you get into your seventies, it becomes, how do you say, more real and apparent. And so, you know, let's really do it. Let's live it up. And it's beautiful to see that at this age, I've actually learned some things about love. There's a great affection and so much more accepting and appreciating of one another.

And it's not that there can't be some moments of—you know, those moments of a little irritation or something. For example, she likes me to drive, which I'm happy to do. I like driving. I was a cab driver in Boston for a few years when I was in graduate school. I have bad driving habits, but I can get through the traffic, whatever. And if I drive, she's supposed to navigate. She's not a very good navigator. It's just, you know. And then she tries to use Siri, but her Siri app, because she speaks fluent French, is in French. It's a Frenchman's voice, a very charming voice. "Go in this direction, go there." I can't even understand what the poor guy is saying, but she finds it charming, right? So we're kind of lost periodically. And I could get annoyed. In fact, I do.

And then I look over and I say, what is the hurry? You're in this car with this beautiful woman that you love. I mean, what better thing to do than be together and have a good time?

And so there's something about having lived through these years of learning to be in relationship, that the love is so much bigger than the stuff that happens. We don't actually have very much stuff between us, Trudy and I. But there's something so sweet. Even the stuff becomes interesting in that way. It's like, oh yeah, look at that. That's very human, and there we are.

Loving awareness, which is what you train when you sit with your own pains and pleasures of your body, or with the emotions of sadness or grief or trauma or loss or longing or love and joy and bliss—loving awareness is a kind of radical intimacy. The Zen master Dogen said, to be enlightened is to become intimate with the world. And you become so close to your experience that you can somehow see into the heart of things, your own or the heart of another being. And what you start to see is that you're not separate, that as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we inter-are.

I was just part of a wedding ceremony that was led by a Hawaiian kahuna, a Hawaiian native healer and wise man. And part of the wedding ceremony, he had the bride and the groom put their noses just next to each other and breathe together, breathe in and out. Prana, it is in Sanskrit, but I don't remember the

Hawaiian word he used—but it was just to let us know that we are really breathing together on this earth, and that we link our breath in this way to remind us that we are really united and connected. It was a really beautiful moment, having them put their noses next to each other and breathe for a while.

And of course, all the modern interpersonal neurobiology, all the science and so forth, and the mirror neurons and all that.

Yeah, the scientists have found out that we're connected. Thank you. Of course we are. We're wildly connected.

When I was in India, you know, more than thirty years ago, traveling, the person I was traveling with had this terrible dream about somebody dying in her family. And I said, no, no, no, that's just part of meditation. You go through birth and death and all the things in you show themselves. That's natural.

I was wrong. Turned out, ten days later, she got a telegram. Her brother had died. And when we looked at the day, it was the same day that she had that vision. And he died in the way that she'd seen.

You've all heard those stories. How many people have had some experience like that? You look around—many, many. Do you know why you know these things? Because we really are connected. And we lose those channels some, because our consciousness becomes much more tuned to the everyday, if you will. But it is a reality. We are connected in consciousness.

Just as we're connected in breath—you who are breathing here, breathing the air of her and him. Oh no, all the cooties and germs and whatever. Too late, baby. We're in it together. We are inter-breathing and we're inter-living. And we also inter-live with the plants and, of course, with the earth around us that needs a little more attention in this way.

So if mindfulness and loving awareness is really a practice of intimacy, it means to be present for yourself or another without trying to fix what's there, but to listen deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. To connect, to feel that connection, to keep your heart open with that other person or yourself or those people, and then from that place to respond.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who's the son of Chogyam Trungpa, taught here one Monday night, and I've gotten to know him a little bit. He wrote a book. He's a great horseman—that's sort of his passion in this life. He writes a story about taking his horse, Rocky, way up in the high mountains in Colorado on a trail at like eleven thousand feet. Rocky's a trail horse, one that's used to galloping and so forth through the woods and kind of more in the lowlands, so he's not really used to mountain trails. But he took his horse, Rocky, with a couple of other people.

They were going on this very narrow trail with a steep drop-off. It was steep above and then a thousand feet of scree down below, and this narrow trail. He said, we were just about to go on the narrow part of the trail, and I got afraid. This Tibetan Lama got afraid. Thank you. That's just human, right? Let's not

glorify all this.

And then he said, I thought, well, if the horse stumbles—because Rocky was a little nervous about it—maybe I should sit a little bit over on this side of the saddle so that if he falls, I can sort of bail and save myself. So we were about to go there, and I shifted myself in the saddle. And then Rocky turned his head and looked at me like saying, "Dude, I thought we were in this together."

And he said, oh, I got it. And I shifted back in the center of the saddle. I said, all right, we can do this. And Rocky took it a little slow and I was there with him and we made it.

So there's something about loving awareness and mindfulness that we're training that is both an intimacy with our experience or with others—not fixing, but seeing the way things are. And then, with an open heart, when you see it clearly, as he did, you can respond. Say, oh yeah, let me shift back to the center of the saddle. Let's do this together.

It allows us to tune to ourselves and tune to another in a wise way.

Now, there's all this science research on mindfulness that everybody knows about—it's become the big thing. There was yoga and now there's mindfulness. And now there's starting to be a lot of research on compassion, which I'm very happy about. I'm actually glad they're researching compassion rather than metta and loving-kindness, because love is such a confusing word in our culture. Everybody kind of gets compassion. You have to be at least somewhat caring, responding to others' concerns, or having compassion for yourself. But love is really rather complex in our minds.

I mean, it's such a big thing. It's the birds and the bees and the glorious awakening of spring that we're about to live through, that we are living through here. It's the prime mover. Maybe love is like gravity—we're pulled to one another because we remember our time in the womb when we were in another person's body, or we remember being back in the Big Bang when we were all living together in that singularity. Then we sort of turned into starlight and congealed, and who knew the earth turned into you.

It's so mysterious. Your spirit and starlight somehow congealed on this particular planet. The green leaves that you see all around you do a magic thing of turning light into sugar. I mean, what an amazing thing. Let's turn light into sugar so that everybody can eat. Is that ever cool? So that's you. You live on sunlight, basically, through the plants and animals, or whatever your diet is.

Anyway, there are all these different kinds of love. I love chocolate. I love the Warriors—I hope they win all these games. So there's that kind of love. There's businessman's love: I'll love you if you give me this, and you can love me and I'll give you that back. That's a fine kind of love. There's familial love for people in your family, when it works. There's brotherly and sisterly love. Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love, of compadres, of caring for one another.

There is—how shall I call it?—infatuation love. Oh baby, I need you, I need you. A million songs on the radio. Teenage love, if you will, which is magnificent. It's really an amazing thing. There's platonic love. There's erotic love.

And erotic love is really an interesting thing, because in many Buddhist texts—which were descriptions of the Buddha teaching monks and nuns—there is a very strong teaching about the dangers or the problems with sexuality and sensuality for renunciates. Sexual desire and the body are seen as something to get over, something not right. But it turns out there are these other texts and teachings, not as many of them but some, in which the Buddha says that for householders—you, me, lay people—this is one of the pleasures of household life. And if there were not pleasure of this sort, people would not choose to be householders.

He goes on to say that happiness exists in household life. What is that happiness? It's a satisfaction gained through the senses: beautiful sights and sounds and tastes and smells and touches and connections with one another. These experiences are attractive, desirable, pleasant, appealing, and worthy experiences. Experiences through the senses are the advantage of household life, so you get to enjoy them. The happiness one derives from these benefits is indeed a happiness that one can learn to enjoy.

So there are these rather mixed messages you get in Buddhist teachings. One great meditation master we brought from Burma, Mahasi Sayadaw—somebody asked him about sex. And he said, "Gross, base, and disgusting." That was his response. We were in our twenties and thirties then, and we thought, okay, that's what he has to say. And then at the end of this long retreat, he came and he left.

It was one of our three-month silent retreats. Afterward, we had Dharma Follies, which was a time for people who'd been silent for three months to express other parts of themselves—to sing and dance and whatever else they wished. I remember a comic routine that Anita Sanders did. She got up and robed herself like she was Mahasi Sayadaw, and she said, "And now I would like to speak about something that is engrossing, basic, and worth discussing"—which was her mirror of "gross, base, and disgusting." No, she insisted, it's engrossing, basic, and worth discussing.

But part of Eros—the thing about Eros as one of the Greek gods, or in India where there are all these fantastic erotic deities and stories—is that it brings us closer to the gods. When we make love, there's pleasure and ecstasy, there's surrender from yourself. There's the petit mort, a dying in some way, an orgasm, and then you have an experience beyond yourself, a union. All of those things, plus the mystery of getting back to where you came from. It's physical and basic in some way, but also so mysterious that it's woven into us. We have these bodies that are built around Eros, among other things. And so there are all these different kinds of love.

And then there's agape. There is metta in its deepest sense, which is love for no reason, which is just love. I've seen it in the teachers and people I admire—both the nobility and the love in Aung San Suu Kyi after seventeen years of prison, carrying so much love for her people. Or Maha Ghosananda, my friend and

teacher who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, leading love walks back for people who'd lost everything and doing loving-kindness as a practice through the killing fields to reclaim their land and their hearts.

I've spent a lot of time in these last years with Ram Dass. He has this big altar in his house in Hawaii because he doesn't travel anymore. He's been in a wheelchair for sixteen years now, and he's eighty-four. On the altar are the different Hindu gods—Krishna and Ram and Sita and Ganesh. And then, of course, there's Mother Mary, a beautiful picture of Jesus, Solomon, a page from the Koran on the mercy of Allah. There are pictures of saints like Neem Karoli Baba and Anandamayi Ma, Indian saints, and Mother Teresa. It's this magnificent, huge altar full of all these great beings.

And then on this altar he always has a few political pictures. He had Dick Cheney for a while, John Boehner. I'm sure he's going to put Scalia on there. And he says, "If I'm to love, why should I make boundaries about my love? And why would I not want Dick Cheney, of all people, to remember love? Why wouldn't I want him to remember that? So he's part of my love practice."

Ram Dass will sit there and say, "I love everything. I love Dick Cheney and Boehner and Anandamayi Ma and Mother Mary and Kuan Yin and that chair over there and you and you and the wallpaper and even the tree outside." He did that for a while. A filmmaker friend of ours was there and said, "Really, you love this dirty carpet?" He said, "Oh, I do. I love everything." Some weeks later, that friend sent him, in a beautiful gold frame, a little square of dirty carpet and said, "I put this on your altar next to all those holy people." Ram Dass said, "Certainly I will."

There's something in these times of such political rancor and estrangement about being able to rest in the noble heart, in the heart of love anyway. It doesn't mean you don't act politically or do what you think is best—but you do it from that place of love.

When Richard Nixon was invited back to the White House during the Carter administration, there was a gathering where they brought the ex-presidents together. This was the first time Nixon had returned after he'd been deposed—the only president, I think, who was essentially kicked out of office for misconduct in U.S. history. Imagine the level of humiliation and shame that must have been, no matter what he did. He came in, and there were some of the other ex-presidents, and he stood alone by himself. Then Jimmy Carter went over to him, shook his hand, kind of pulled him in, and said, "Mr. President, welcome home."

It was apparently a turning point in Nixon's life—feeling like he wasn't a complete failure, that some healing was possible. And of course, Jimmy Carter is someone who has used his ex-presidency as a Nobel laureate now in the most magnificent ways.

This is really what's possible. The invitation of the Dharma is to remember that this is in you as well. And you can practice it—loving-kindness, mindfulness.

My dear friend and colleague Sharon Salzberg was practicing in Burma, doing her metta: "May I be safe, may I be well, may I be happy"—all the phrases of loving-kindness. She said it felt very dry and

mechanical, but she kept doing it because the teacher said it would work sometime. She's physically kind of awkward, she said. One afternoon she was doing her metta practice and picked up a tray with a plate and a glass. She dropped it and they all smashed on the floor. She heard her voice inside say, "You're such a klutz." And then: "I love you." She said, "Oh, it's working."

What you practice, what seeds you plant, transforms your heart. And then you can use it to move from estrangement or violence or difficulties to begin to build bridges of love—while you stay in your own dignity, your own nobility.

I like that St. Valentine's Day has this very complicated history, but in the simplest way, here's the saint part that represents the spiritual, and then the erotic part, which is actually very human. And those two are wedded together.

I guess I'll tell you this story. Let's see if I have time.

And for months they were happy together. But one day, while the new wife was out, his curiosity became so intense that he crept over to the box and opened it. To his surprise, it had nothing inside.

When she got home, she looked at his face and she knew. She said, "You opened the box, didn't you?"

"Yes," said the young man, "but it was empty. So what's so secret about an empty box?"

The sky woman was devastated, and a tear trickled down her cheeks. She said, "I'm sorry, but I can't live with you any longer."

"Why? What's so terrible about peeking into an empty box?"

"I'm not leaving you because you opened the box," said the young woman. "We all do that at times, right? I'm leaving because you said it was empty. It wasn't empty. It was full of sky—full of the light and air and smells of my parents' home. When I went back to the sky village where I lived that last time, I filled the box with everything that was precious to me. And how can I be your wife when what is most precious to me is emptiness to you?"

Some of these stories don't work out quite the way you'd like them to, the happily-ever-after part. But there's something really profound here. I could take a whole evening just to unpack the images of that story.

Part of it is that our love really requires that we respect one another—that true love is not possessive love. "I'm going to have what you have, or look into what you have." There has to be a respect for what we agree to, for who we are with one another. So that's a piece of it. Love is not possessive.

If it's possessive, then it's possessiveness, but it's different than love. And you'll notice your children don't like to be clung to, don't like you deciding how they should be. Your partners don't like it. Love is very different than that kind of attachment.

The Buddha says, "This land is mine, these children are mine"—these are the words of folly of a man who doesn't realize that even he isn't his. You don't even control your own thoughts very well, do you? What are you going to possess? So love isn't about possession, but it is about making the space of love that can acknowledge and respect with a kind of caring connection.

And then it's mysterious. The emptiness of that box—because emptiness is so central to Buddhist teaching—speaks to how things are ephemeral, how they arise and pass away. Nothing can be possessed, including your own life, which eventually will end. That's the big mystery. In Zen, they use poetic images of the blackbird singing in the dead of night, or the white crane standing in the snow. Those are poems that speak about something ineffable, the pregnancy of emptiness. That box wasn't empty. It was full of possibility. It was full of sky and space and beauty, if we can see it. And Eros and presence and loving awareness has as much as anything a kind of wonder in it, mystery and intimacy. Instead of possession, it sees the secret beauty of every being, the nobility of every being, and holds their pain with mercy and tenderness.

Most of you who knew him know that Stephen Levine died some weeks ago. We'll do a big memorial here that people will be welcome to come to in May. His teaching was really about this kind of tenderness and mercy. He would say, "Simply touching a difficult memory with the slightest willingness to heal begins to soften the holding and tension around it. If there's a single definition of healing, it's to enter with mercy and awareness those pains, mental and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment or fear or dismay." His whole work was really inviting this kind of intimacy—both with what's painful and with what's beautiful—getting people to learn forgiveness, getting people to learn to love in a deeper way. And more than anything, since he wrote and worked so often with people at the end of their lives, he would say—not to those who were dying but to those around them—"If you were going to die soon and had only one phone call you could make, who would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting?"

We are both timeless beings of spirit and tender, vulnerable humans. We have survival in us. Every one of you is courageous. Every one of you has nobility. Courage beyond measure you have, because you're still here. You've gone through so many things. And somehow when we sit in meditation, the invitation of nobility and dignity—like the leadership we started with—is to come back to this place of fertile emptiness, of spaciousness, of the pregnant silence that can tend our own bodies and hearts and minds, that can sense that we live in both the immediacy of our life and in eternity.

Then things start to take a different cast. You pick up the cobbled skin of an orange and smell it and think, how mysterious that there's this globe of sweet sugar water with an orange flavor shipped to you from some orchard in Southern California or Florida. Or you pick up the tender golden skin of an apricot that's so fuzzy and soft with its golden glow. What an amazing planet we live on that has things like this. Or the plum blossoms that have come out—they're so delicate, and the scent, and here they are. "Hi, for your enjoyment, we're going to put plum blossoms on your planet." It's amazing.

The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. As you train yourself in love, as you remember that you can carry dignity and integrity and generosity, that the nobility the Buddha invites you to remember—O nobly born—is there within you, you discover that wherever you are in life, no matter how terrible the circumstances on certain days or how beautiful, they're workable. Because your heart has in it more freedom and compassion than you could imagine. O nobly born, this is your true nature. And the invitation of the meditation and the practices and trainings is to come back to this, to feel it and strengthen it and know it.

So let's do a few minutes of metta, loving-kindness practice, as a way to end the evening.

The instructions from the Buddha for those who seek love: May you be able and upright, straightforward, of gentle speech, content and unburdened. May you do nothing mean or that the wise would reprove. And may you live with these intentions: May beings everywhere be happy. May they live in safety and joy.

As a mother watches over her child, willing to risk her own life to protect her only child, so with a boundless heart, cherish all living beings as your children. Suffuse the whole world with unobstructed loving-kindness.

So with your eyes closed, the beautiful instructions in metta are to look toward whatever most naturally awakens your heart. Think of someone that you love and care about, someone who is not too complicated or conflicted, where there is just an easy, natural outpouring of love. Remember them or picture them. It can be a person you care about. It could even be your dog—"Oh, you're home! How great!"

Picture this being who looks at you with the eyes of love. It's like what we said about Ram Dass, looking at everyone, loving everyone. And because that love is naturally there for you as you remember them, you can offer a kind of well-wishing: May you be filled with loving-kindness. May you be safe and protected. May you be well in body and mind, strong, healed. And may you be happy.

While it can feel mechanical at first, feel how these intentions can gradually soften the heart and open the channel of love. You picture this person. May you be filled with loving-kindness—how you care for them. May you be safe and protected. May you be well and strong, body and mind. And may you be happy, wishing their happiness.

Feeling the love that you have for them now, imagine that they could gaze back at you with the same care you offer them. They look at you with loving eyes and they say: May you too be filled with loving-kindness. May you too be safe and protected. May you too be well, healed, strong. They gaze at you so kindly: And may you too be happy.

We can be so loyal to our suffering. They say, "No, no—may you be happy." And you take it in. If you like, you can even put your hand on your heart. May I, as they wish for me, may I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be safe and protected. May I be well and healed. And may I be happy. Allow yourself to be happy. "Live in joy," says the Buddha, "in this world."

And finally, let the spirit of loving-kindness spread across this room in your imagination, touching all those you have been breathing together with for this last hour, wishing them loving-kindness and safety and well-being. Let it stretch from this room like a lighthouse beacon across the bay area and out across the continents and the oceans and the whole of the earth. Your noble heart, your heart of loving-kindness and care that you inhabit just now, offers your intentions, your wishes of well-being to beings everywhere, in all forms.

May beings everywhere be held in this great loving-kindness. May beings everywhere be safe and protected. May beings everywhere be well and healed. And may beings everywhere be free.

Know that you can practice and carry this spirit of loving-kindness like a lighthouse or a beacon. You can be the leader in your own family or community, with those you share life with—generosity and integrity and love. This is given to you. It is what is possible for you, O nobly born. Remember this. Carry it with you.

It's dark and crowded out there, so be kind with that. And those who can, please help put the chairs away.

So much appreciation.

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