Attachment, Commitment and Love

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 53:55

Let yourself sit and be comfortable. The teachings tonight are really a kind of contemplation or reflection for you to listen to. You don't have to remember anything. There's no quiz at the end, no grades. You can listen to see if it reminds you of something important, or in what way it might, and that's beautiful. And if some of it doesn't seem useful, just let it go. It's probably wrong. Who knows? My daughter thinks so. But you can listen as a meditation in that way.

I want to start by acknowledging that it's the Monday after Easter, and it's insanely wild spring out there from all that thankful March rain. Easter and Passover and all the various spring holidays with the eggs and the bunnies are really the ancient archetypal celebration of the renewal of life, of the fertility of life and the rebirth after a long winter. One of the questions is: how do you navigate death and rebirth? Because there's a way in which we're all dying and being reborn all the time.

I had the opportunity after a retreat recently to drive back into Woodacre—I now live in Fairfax—to the house which I had helped create and where I lived for thirty years. It was kind of wild looking at it. It's lovely; a young couple are there who are about to have kids, and it's the perfect place for that. We raised our daughter there. And I thought, wow, that was a life, wasn't it? And it's all gone. Actually, only a few people even remember what happened there and how it was created. And then that will be gone too. Things appear, we experience them, and they're gone. Like your childhood, for example. Or Tutankhamen, or the dinosaurs. Or Y2K, if you remember that. Or cassette tapes. Stuff happens and then it disappears. And what do we do with that?

It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, says the Buddha, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not. So that's some medicine there, isn't it? But this is our human incarnation—it is designed this way. This is our human lot. So how do we deal with this?

In Colorado, there is a woman who made a kind of ritual work of art that I talk about sometimes called the Salt Monument. She made a temple for it, and in the middle is a giant glass or lucite crystal that turns every twenty-four hours. It's filled with seven and a half billion crystals of salt, one for each human being on the earth. As the priestess of the Salt Monument, every evening she goes in and takes a beautiful ritual container and from the bottom of it pours out two hundred thousand grains of salt for the two hundred thousand people that died that day. Think about that—this day on earth. She says some prayers over it and does a kind of ritual return to the earth. Then every morning she comes in and pours in another ritual container of two hundred fifty thousand grains of salt for the two hundred fifty thousand babies that will

be born that day.

That's us. We're coming and going, baby. That's just how it works.

Our practice of mindfulness and loving awareness gives us the capacity to be with birth and death and change—the inevitability of it—from the place of a witnessing loving awareness, a place of balance or wisdom. Now, it ain't that easy. We live in a time of toxic politics where there's a lot of fear and racism and terrorism. You look and you think, oh my gosh, what is happening? Worldwide terrorism, what's happening to the climate, what's happening in our politics, what's going to happen? That's on one side.

And then on the other side, there's a million acts of goodness every single day—gestures of care, the blooming trees of spring, the unbearable beauty of the earth—along with the suffering and the greed and the idiocy.

We could have a small vision about it. There was a guy, I think he was a Texas oilman—not to say anything about Texas, but maybe a little bit about the brashness of it—who was wealthy, and he went to Picasso's studio to buy a Picasso, because he could. While being shown around, he said to Picasso, "Why don't you paint things more like they are?" Imagine saying that to Picasso. And Picasso said, "What do you mean, the way they are?" The man said, "Well, like here," and he pulled out his wallet and showed a photograph of his wife. Picasso held it up and said, "Hmm, she's rather flat and small, isn't she?"

There's a way in which we can have a very rigid view of things and how they're supposed to be. That small sense of self—that we think we know what's real and how things are supposed to be—is very limited. But there's something bigger going on than our ideas about it. As I say so often, the question is not the future of humanity but the presence of eternity.

So there is an invitation in the meditation practice. The Buddha's texts begin, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of the awakened ones, remember who you are, remember your inherent dignity, your capacity for compassion. This is your birthright." Make room for this possibility.

Because here we are in this beautiful springtime, and there's something mysterious that's also true. There are some questions that can't be answered by Google: Who are we? How do we navigate this? What is this for?

There's a Zen story from third grade. Ruth remembers being a girl, daughter of a sharecropper in South Carolina, one of ten kids living in a little cabin. One day in spring, her third grade teacher said there would be a talent show. Little Ruth went home troubled, thinking, "What talent do I have?" She couldn't sleep that night and paced the porch before the field. Then the clouds parted and the moon, almost full, filled her face and turned the boards of the porch into blue and illuminated everything with its glorious moonlight. Her little mouth dropped open and she felt like there was something magic, and she was a part of it. When asked the next day, she said her talent was seeing the moon.

There's something that we're being asked to do: to see in a more timeless way, to live from that wisdom and that reality. And then as we open that space of seeing in a new way, with a kind of willingness and courage, we get what Zorba called the whole catastrophe. We get the magnificence of it and we get the ocean of tears. We get the beauty and we get the tragedy of it. This is human incarnation. Anybody not have that, by the way? Just checking.

So what do we do then? What we want is to wait for a kind of opening in it. Like that little girl on the porch, not knowing, and then she waited and—ah—now the moonlight comes in to show me something new. We allow ourselves to turn our attention and our hearts and our goodwill to this mystery of who am I. How do I navigate birth and death, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow? Am I always grasping at this and afraid of that? Or is there some more noble and wise way to move through all of this change?

But if you open, as Zorba says, to the catastrophe, not only is there the beauty of the moon in the spring, but you also open to the ocean of tears—your worries for the earth and what we're doing to it, your own personal grief and sadness for the losses you've had, the anger, the doubt about how to live in this world. Those too are vast. And it's not so easy.

Here's James Baldwin, such a magnificent writer and visionary. He says, "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word love here, not in a merely personal sense, but as a state of being or a state of grace, not in the infantile American sense of being made happy by stuff or someone"—that's quite a phrase, isn't it? Thank you, James—"but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and courage and growth."

It's a different meaning of love than the love of gratification.

It's the love of willingness to show up for this life fully. And that takes awareness and attention and courage and love.

And periodically you will die. I mean, yes, you're going to die anyway—that's right, we know that. We've got the statistics, and the mortuary is waiting for you, I promise you. They've got it all figured out. But you're going to have other deaths as you go along.

And the person who is really being on the way, writes the Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim, who falls upon hard times in the world, will not as a consequence turn to those friends who offer refuge and comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening.

So spring comes, but it also comes after winter. And rebirth comes after death. That's the way it seems to

work in this life. You have to let go of this to move into that. Or you have to go through the dark night to come to some other dimension of being. And it requires a deep trust.

Again, Pablo Neruda, that line I love, where he writes: "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." There's something so large that we are a part of—life, we are life—that no matter what we do as human beings, there's some bigger force, because we're a part of that, that's going to push the weeds and the grass through the cracks in the stone on the sidewalk. Tennessee Williams wrote, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's something about life that will renew itself—with you in some way, or without you. It just does. And you begin to trust it.

And then you see, all right, here's the toxic politics. You may have noticed that. H.L. Mencken, the great political commentator from the 1920s, wrote: "The whole aim of politics is to frighten and menace the populace with an endless series of hobgoblins, almost all exaggerated and unreal, as a way to gain power." Thank you for your analysis. Be afraid, be really afraid, and I am going to make it all better for you. The world won't be dangerous again because I'll take care of it all.

So what to do with it? Yes, vote. Yes, act in some way. But also turn off the damn news for a while. Gandhi took a day a week—in the middle of bringing down the British Empire—in silence, just to walk outside and listen to his heart and try to hear something more eternal than the battle he was in.

This is from Veronica Patterson, a poet. She writes:

"Say over and over again the names of things, the clean nouns: weeping birch, tanager, damask rose. Read field guides, atlases, gravestones. At the store, bless each apple by kind: Macintosh, Winesap, Delicious, Jonathan. Enunciate the vegetables and herbs: okra, cilantro, calendula. After a speech compromising the environment, recite the tough, silky structure of spider webs—ladder web, mesh web, funnel. Chant the spiders: comb-footed, round-headed, garden cross, feather-legged, ogre-faced. Remember that most short verbs are ethical: hatch, grow, spin, trap, eat. Dig deep, pronounce clearly, pull the words in over your head, and hole up until it's time to hatch."

Something like that. Her advice is not to get too engaged in it. I'm not saying whether you should or not, because there is also a responsibility, and I'm not trying to say there isn't something that really needs our attention. But there's a way in which you can get wound up in that and forget the vastness of it, forget what really matters. And it is scary, because sometimes it's a train wreck, and there's a lot of collateral damage to thousands and millions of human lives. So it is something we have to pay attention to.

But we also have to listen in a new way for an opening—listen without so much being in the middle of it, without attachment to it—and say, "Well, wow, yes, I could read Machiavelli and Sun Tzu as well, because they're sort of describing what's happening strategically. This is interesting. This is how human beings are trying to solve problems, and some of it is really messed up, but it's not a new thing. We're actually part of this. This is how humanity does it." Step back a bit and say, "What can I do? What can make a difference?"

I received a story that was sent to me today. I'd spent some time in Israel and Palestine, visiting and giving some teachings, and also meeting with various peacemaking groups. One of the things that's most both heartbreaking and important about what I saw there is that what you get in the news is all the conflict—the suicide bombings, the shootings of Palestinian youth, all of those kind of things. That's what makes the news. But there are two hundred groups doing amazing cross-border peace connection work. The people who were replanting olive groves. I met with the Former Combatants for Peace, and the grieving, bereaved mothers from both sides, and the teenage Palestinian and Israeli groups that are coming together. There are hundreds of those as well, groups of goodwill that never make the news.

So this is a story of a group that was doing peacemaking work on both sides. It was a group of Israelis and Americans who went over to do some peacemaking work, first in Israel and then into Palestine. They were coming back and bringing a Palestinian man with them for another group meeting in Israel. They came up to the gate, and he had been lucky—somehow the computer missed that he was an activist in some way, so he got a permit to cross the border. They all went up in their little bus, and they had a special meeting coming up.

The soldier who was there, a young woman with a machine gun, said to the Palestinian, "Your permit—you have to go through that other gate. This is not for Palestinians. It's an hour away. You've got to get there, and maybe they'll let you through." She was very curt, just doing the soldier thing. "You're not allowed," and so forth.

The woman telling this story said, "I looked at this young woman in her uniform with her machine gun, and she was very stern. But every time she spoke, she also had her hair pulled back—this long black hair, tied up a little bit. And she'd flop her head, and her voice was saying no, no, no, but her hair was saying something different."

"I didn't judge her. I just saw she was in a difficult situation, and she was a human being. I just looked at her, this older woman, and I said, 'I know it's complicated. Is there any way you can find a way to help us? We have to join our friends in the South. We have to do it fast. This is a group, and this man is really part of it. We can't leave without him. Is there some way?'"

She paused for a minute and put her gun to the side. She moved toward a bunch of keys and said, "You see that gate? If he crosses it quickly and calmly, he can walk five minutes and take a taxi to this other place—five minutes, you can meet him, and it'll be all right."

"I saw the opening, and I honored her, and we responded. She got a little bit calmer. We talked a little bit about how hard it was. I asked her, 'How is it to be a soldier?' She said, 'It's terrible. I go home and I don't smile all week. And now I'm supposed to be happy when I go home to see my mother?'"

"I looked at this dark, slender young girl in front of me, young enough to be my daughter, and I became so curious. I wanted to ask her about her hair. What's the story? I was convinced that this hair had its own

language, so I did."

"She said, 'It's a reminder that I am a woman. That I'm born into life to love. I tend to forget this in the uniform, and I've forgotten how to smile with so much suffering around. But then my hair slaps my face, it blows, and reminds me I'm a woman. No one can bury this fact under any kind of uniform. When I'm out of here, I will work for peace like you.'"

Now she was speaking the same language as her hair, and her hair was soft and calm.

So there's something in these troubled times in which you're asked not to take the conflict into yourself, but to step back and sense the play of life, and then look for your opening. Because it will be there—with another person, or in a political way, or just in the human-to-human way.

Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see. This is from Mark Twain.

You can feel the power in his very simple words.

So then the question is, all right, how do we do this? We wait for these moments, these openings. We keep a bigger perspective. And the way to do it is without attachment.

This is really important. Let me talk about attachment for a bit, because all those spiritual books you read say you shouldn't be attached. And you think, what the hell does that mean? Really? Does it mean you have to throw away your family and your clothes and your car and your music and become a monk or a nun, not attached to your bowl and your robes and whatever happens? There doesn't seem to be any monk or nun material out here—maybe a few—but it's got to mean something more than that. And there were tens of thousands of awakened disciples of the Buddha who weren't monks and nuns. So what does it mean?

Well, one thing about the word that's important is that it has very different meanings in Western psychology and in Eastern psychology. In Western psychology, attachment is healthy. You want secure attachment between a mother or primary caregiver and their child, their baby especially. If there's a kind of attention and care and attunement—good enough, good enough—then that child realizes they belong here. They internalize this sense of being seen and loved, and they feel like they're part of the human race. But if there's not that secure attachment, then you get different things called insecure attachment or avoidant attachment, where they can't really make healthy relationships because they're not even connected to themselves. There's all kinds of trauma in that. We all know that in Western psychology, all the healing necessary.

So for the West, a psychologist talks about the health of attachment. It gets confusing because when you talk about non-attachment in the East, does it mean a mother shouldn't be attached to her baby? Does it mean a partner shouldn't be attached to their lover? That you shouldn't care about things?

You need to start paying attention to what it means when I say how to do this, to do it without attachment.

What could that mean? And the way you get to know about it is you feel it in your body. This is not some philosophical thing I'm talking about.

There you are in a little conflict with your kids, which could happen, or a little conflict with your parents, or a little conflict with someone you love. Families are the best petri dish for all this stuff, but there are also people you work with and things like that. And your kids don't like it when you try to control them. Control and attachment are a little bit close together, you'll probably notice. It's one thing to foster them, but when you try to control them, when you're attached to how they're supposed to be, how do they feel? They hate it and they let you know it, or else they get really pouty or go inward or neurotic, whatever they do with it. But it doesn't work very well. Neither does it work with your lovers, quite honestly. "I want you to be this way for me," and "You should..."—how does that fly? Or your colleagues, and so forth.

You actually can start to feel it in your body, the difference between love, when you love somebody, and attachment, when you need them to be a certain way. They feel very different. One is clinging and holding on, and you can feel it viscerally in your gut, in your muscles, in your nervous system. You know what I'm talking about. And so non-attachment doesn't mean not relating, but it means to be present without the grasping, without the controlling. It's not in your control anyway—we'll get to that.

My teacher Ajahn Chah used to wander around the monastery. He also had a good sense of humor, and he would kind of tootle up to people, especially if it looked like they were having a hard time, and he'd say, "Are you suffering?" If they said no, he'd say, "Great! Have a beautiful day, lovely spring day, nice to see you." And if they said yes, he'd just look and say, "Ah, must be attached." Then smile and tootle off again.

It was like that—directly related. You're suffering. Not your pain, because you'll have pain. Not your loss, that's part of joy and sorrow. All that stuff comes with being human, with incarnation.

But your suffering is directly related to how attached you are. That's worth a pause.

Then he would say, all right. He used to talk about letting go. He 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 really let go, you'll be truly happy.

But there's something else to say about that, which is that sometimes we translate letting go as getting rid of. "Oh, I'm afraid. I want to let go of that fear and not have it come anymore." That's not letting go. That's aversion. "I don't want that." So sometimes the translation for letting go is better rendered as letting be—just letting it be the way it is without trying to control it. Sometimes you can let stuff go, but sometimes it's there and it's with you, and you say, okay, let it be. But you don't identify with it. You don't take it personally. You don't hold on to it.

Even this wonderful guru I spent time with in India, Nisargadatta—somebody asked him, "Here you are, you talk about mind vast like space and not being identified with the body and mind. You're this great saint, this sage. Do you ever get angry? Do you ever get upset?" He said, "Oh, sometimes, you know, if I'm really hungry and my food doesn't come on time and it's not there, I can get irritated, I can get annoyed."

He said, "But it has nothing to do with me. It's just my body doing its thing." He said, "It's like it's there, but who I am is so much bigger than that. It just plays through." I didn't talk to his wife, so we don't know.

But then you say, all right, if I'm not attached, then what about marriage? What about relationship? What about family? What about social justice? What about care for the things in the world that matter if you're not attached? Isn't that sort of that Buddhist navel-gazing—everything is impermanent and I just let it come and go?

How do you operate then without attachment? There's a different frequency, a different capacity than control and attachment. And here are some words that describe it: dedication, commitment, direction, care. So instead of attachment in a love relationship—instead of "I need you to be a certain way" and controlling—it's "I'm dedicated to this. I tend and care, and I want you to flower as best you can. I want the best for you, as best I can, and for myself." It's not clinging but dedication. You're dedicated to your children. You're dedicated to the work that you do to change the world, or to bring something beautiful as an artist or a parent or in conscious business. It takes dedication, it takes commitment, and it takes direction. It can even take a kind of ambition—but a wise ambition. And what does that mean? It means that you're there, but you're not in that controlling place with it.

It also means that even though you're not attached, you show up. Because a lot of spiritual practice is really about whether you're avoiding relationship, whether you're avoiding actually being present for life with its pain and its beauty. And to become noble, dignified—all those lovely qualities that come from meditation where you practice this with all that comes up in your life—it requires somehow that you're willing to be present for it, not to turn your gaze away.

I told this story last month, the month before, but I've been telling it just because it's fun. The son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who's a lama teaching a lot in America, is also a great horseman. Their family is. He'd lived for a while in Boulder, Colorado, and his favorite horse, Rocky, was a horse he used for dressage and in the ring, and sometimes would just gallop out on the plains. But he decided to take Rocky on a trail ride with some other people, way up high—eleven thousand feet in the mountains. Rocky wasn't a trail horse.

Trail horses know how to turn around and back up, but Rocky hadn't done that. And they went along this trail that got very narrow, with a thousand-foot drop-off on one side, a big cliff on the other, and some scree. It was not an easy trail.

When they got to the hard part, they paused. Rinpoche, the young lama, looked down and thought, "Man, if Rocky slips even a little bit, I'm a goner." And then he thought, "Maybe I should just shift over a little to the upside, so if he slips I can sort of jump off the saddle and maybe I won't go down with him."

So he moved his weight a little bit to that side before going on the trail—and Rocky stopped at that second, turned his head around, and looked at him like, "Dude, I thought we were in this together."

And then the lama, the young lama, centered himself back on the saddle. "Okay, we're in it. We're in it together." He relaxed, and Rocky relaxed, and then step by step they went across that trail.

So to not be attached doesn't mean that you're not present. You're present—but in a different way. And the secret is to act well without attachment to the outcome. Because that part is not given to you. How your child is going to turn out, whether your business will succeed or not, your art project, the social justice thing that you do—whatever it happens to be.

I read probably every few talks this passage from Thomas Merton, writing to a young activist who was discouraged: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not perhaps bring about its opposite. As you understand this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself."

And in that way, what you're doing is beginning to trust that you face the right direction, you plant the seeds of something that really matters to you, and eventually somehow that will bear fruit. That's not up to you—when the plant grows. You water it and you tend it, but what's given to you in this human incarnation is to act beautifully. And then the world will receive that, and it will bear fruit in its own time.

There's a sense, as you do this in non-attachment, of the emptiness of it, if you will. Like going to my house of thirty years and realizing there are only a handful of people who have any memory of how it was built and what we did. And then that will be gone too. It's just like a whole life—that part of thirty years of life disappeared. Things are that way. They're empty because they exist for a time and then they're gone. So what you get to do is tend them and make beautiful things that add to the long term. Now it's a beautiful home for somebody else to raise their children in. But it's mysterious. It's not yours to possess. It just isn't.

It's a little bit like the serenity prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Somehow there's something very similar in this. And there's a kind of trust that you listen for that opening—like the swish of that Palestinian young woman's hair—and realize, "Okay, she's saying no, but her hair is indicating there's somebody else under that machine gun in that soldier's uniform." And you wait, and you see. And you feel it in your body. You can tell when you're possessed and clinging. The people around you know it very well. And you suffer.

Ajahn Chah would say, "Oh, must be attached!" And then you realize, "Oh, maybe I could let it go a little bit."

Now, I just had the pleasure of doing a retreat myself for part of this March month-long retreat.

I sat for almost three weeks. Part of the time it was very quiet—I got concentrated and dissolved my body into light, samadhi experiences and such. But part of the time my mind was really busy, much more than I would have liked.

Right before I went on my retreat, in the week and days before, I got a whole bunch of emails from places where I often teach saying, "We're making our 2017 calendar." Here we are talking about living in the moment, and I am scheduled into 2018. It's insane. But they need to know because they'll save a space or they won't, and you've got to respond right away—from Kripalu and Omega and Esalen and wherever it happens to be. Then I'm planning things in China, and they want to do something in India. So I've got all this material swirling around.

And I'm sitting there trying to be quiet, knowing all those things have to be answered. I'm also worried because a few days before I sat, one of my best friends fell and broke her hip and is in the hospital. And another person I was tending to, whose teenage daughter is really going through a hard time. My mind is just going: "You have to take care of this. You have to fit it all together. You have to do it right away when you get out, because otherwise 2017 will be a mess. And you've got to do it in a sane way. Not do too much." And so on.

I keep saying, "Later, later," but my mind doesn't listen. Then I go, "Okay, samadhi," and I enter this deep, quiet place. But the minute I stop concentrating, it all rushes back in. I find that unpleasant because I just want to be quiet.

But after a while of this, I thought, well, maybe what I have to do is write down all these things I'm worried about or thinking I have to tend to. In five minutes, I wrote down forty-five things. Who I have to call, this email, that arrangement with China, those people in India, this thing with the Dalai Lama if I'm lucky, this person in the hospital I need to tend to. If I'd taken ten minutes, I'm sure I could have written down forty-five more.

But I wrote them down, and then I looked at the list and thought: *Thank you.* Thank you to my mind. I said, "You're trying to take care of all this business. I'm having a retreat and you're trying to take care of all this stuff and take care of me." I just kind of bowed to it instead of judging it. I said, "Thank you for doing all that. My God, you're taking care of a lot of business." And it just relaxed me a little bit. There wasn't quite that little controlling thing happening anymore.

Where's that poem from Kabir? I love it. The Indian mystic. He says: "Friends, please tell me what I can do about this world that I hold on to and it keeps spinning me out. I gave up my sewn clothes and wore a robe, but I noticed one day how well woven was the cloth. So I bought some burlap, but I still throw it elegantly over my left shoulder. I pull back my sexual longings, and now I discover that I'm angry a lot. I gave up rage, and now I notice that I'm greedy all day. I worked hard at dissolving the greed, and now I'm proud of myself. When the mind wants to break its links with the world, it still holds on to something, doesn't it?"

And so it's just its nature.

The Buddha described our human incarnation, our human lot, as being a river. He actually said it's five

rivers: a river of sense experience, a river of feelings—all these feelings. I have a list of five hundred feelings that I compiled in the days before Google. You can look it up. It starts with the A's: angry and antsy and ambivalent and affectionate and amorous and apoplectic. And it just goes on and on.

Then you go to the B's: bored, bonkers, brokenhearted, blissed out. So there's a river of feelings—you know that river. There's a river of sensations. There's a river of perceptions: this is a man, this is a woman, this is a room. There's a way that we've been entrained to perceive the world and organize it, and so we have moment-to-moment perception of things. There is a river of thoughts. And anybody who has sat in meditation for, let's say, thirty seconds—oh my gosh, the first insight is the waterfall of thoughts. And the point isn't to stop it. The mind secretes thoughts like the endocrine gland secretes hormones. It just does.

And then there's the river of consciousness. The difference between someone who is liberated or awake, says the Buddha, and an ordinary person, is that an ordinary person has these five rivers—the river of sense experience, the river of all the changing feelings, the river of changing perceptions, the river of changing thoughts, the river of changing consciousness. And the one who is liberated has the same five rivers, only they don't cling to them. That's all. They're not identified. They don't take it personally. That's all. That's the definition of freedom.

So freedom comes through this training that we're doing of loving awareness, where you notice the feelings, you notice the thoughts, and you say, "Oh yeah, thank you for helping me," whatever—and you don't take them so personally. This is sadness, and this is grief, and this is joy, and it's part of our human lot, and you don't identify as much, particularly with the thoughts. As one great Lama said, "The mind creates both samsara and nirvana, yet there's nothing much to it. It's just made of thoughts. When we realize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us."

And so you start to see that thoughts are ephemeral, they're like clouds. And not only that—you can have an opinion about a person, or about politics, or about whatever it is, and then you can have the opposite thought three days or three years later. "Oh yeah, but my thoughts are really important, real." Well, good luck with that.

So the difference is to not grasp and to not identify and to not take it so personally, which is part of what you learn as you sit. It doesn't really matter what happens when you sit here. Your body hurts, your body is pleasant and at ease, your mind quiets, your mind is full of plans or storms, your emotions come, your emotions go. Someone says one sitting is better than another. Not really. The question is: can you find the place of balance and loving awareness that can allow your humanity to rise and fall like waves of the ocean? Can you become the space of balance and understanding and compassion for all of it?

And the point isn't that it's supposed to be a grim duty. As I say, the point isn't to perfect yourself. You've tried that for a long time—see how far you got? "Okay, I did my therapy, I went to the gym, I did a diet." How much did that work? I mean, those things are all fine, but the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's really to perfect this capacity to love, to perfect your love for this human life that each one has been given.

And then when you do, you can go back into the world, so to speak, from the sitting or from the temple. And you tend it with care, not with grasping. "Like a garland of beautiful flowers," says the Buddha, "make of your life a garland of beautiful deeds." This is the garden of the world, and you weed it and you fertilize it and you give it water and you tend it as best you can and you plant seeds moment to moment. And those seeds, even if they're not bearing fruit when you're there—the beautiful thing about a seed is it's miraculous. Sometime or other, it's going to make a difference.

And do you know why that is? Because it's all interconnected. Not just the butterfly wing in South America that changes all the weather patterns—in fact, it is interconnected. And so the seeds that you plant ripple out to the people around you, the things that you touch, the ones that they touch, and the ones that the others touch, and the environment that everyone moves through. It can't not affect the world. That's the beautiful thing. You get a chance to do something to the world with the way you drive or eat or speak or create or build or whatever it is that you do, or parent.

And so you plant these beautiful seeds, but you do it from a place of openness. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker—a big church, you know, and the billboard in front said, "Follow God on Twitter."

So that's about where we are in this age. You remember your Buddha nature and mystery, and you also remember that April 15th you owe your taxes. You have your Buddha nature and your social security number, and both are to be tended to with the same care.

This is from the poet Rilke: "In order for a thing to speak to you, you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists." Georgia O'Keeffe, who did those extraordinary paintings of desert flowers, was very straightforward about it. She said the reason she painted that way was so that people would actually see the flower, because it's so small in the desert. She wanted them to get it, to really look at it.

In order for a thing to speak to you, says Rilke, you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists. And through your laborious and exclusive love, the one and only phenomenon is now placed at the center of the universe. And in that incomparable place on that day, it is attended by angels.

There's something so important about being able to give attention fully to your own breath, your feelings, the body—the unique body that is one and only in the whole galaxy. There's never been someone like you over all of infinite time. Isn't that wild? And so you look: wow, look at this one, and look at that flower, and that one. You're there with it, tending and caring with respect. And that's a wild one, and that's a kind of mean one—they're out there, I assure you. And that's a loving one. You see all the flowers, and then you see which ones you want to water.

There is something about being able to be in this world with a sense of spaciousness and mystery, an inner balance of loving awareness that's really who you are. Then you can allow the changes and the cycles that make up every human life. Winter and spring, birth and death happen all the time. With a gracious heart, you become wise.

And that is really what the world needs. If it needs anything from you, it needs your wisdom and your compassion, your love. I think that's really why doing the practices that we do is important—because they teach us how to do that.

O nobly born, say the Buddhist texts, remember what is possible for you. Remember that within you is the great heart of compassion. Within you is the wisdom, and who you really are is awareness itself—this timeless loving awareness. Trust it. Rest in it. It is your own true nature. It is home.

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