Vastness and Love

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:01:54

Please let yourself get settled and quiet.

As a way to collect the energy in here—because it's interesting, it's kind of bright and bouncy, the sound—I want us to do a little chant as a way to settle after conversation. The chant is one syllable. It's a seed syllable in Sanskrit that's called the syllable of wisdom because it's described as the first sound in life and the last sound. But most importantly, it's the seed syllable of wisdom because it's the sound of opening or letting go, the seed sound *ah*.

Let us sing *ah* together for a little bit as a way to collect our energy present and see what happens.

Ah...

That was nice. You sing good. And I don't know what I like better—the harmony when people start to sing the chord, or the silence afterward. That's also quite beautiful.

I'm glad you got to say hello to somebody. That feels important. There's something special for me tonight coming back to teach on just the second Monday night I've done. I've done a couple of other teachings in here since this space opened, but it feels very special to be here. And I'm so grateful that you've come as well.

I'm also in this beautiful time of my life, because as I said, I've recently gotten married to Trudy Goodman, who is a colleague and friend—I've known her for forty-three years. She's someone I also teach with. I knew her when she was a feminist, and she called herself Trudy Goodwoman for a while. Then I said, "Goodwoman, isn't that limiting? Why not Trudy Goodbeing?" She did that for a year or two.

We've already had four weddings. We've got a couple more to go. We started with a little private ceremony with Ram Dass in Hawaii. He married us in his garden, and it was just a couple of people—Ram Dass and a couple of others. It was such a beautiful blessing. Then we had ceremonies for our families, people in our community, on the East Coast. And the nice thing about it is that we're really happy. Everybody who sees us is happy, and they kind of shower us with their joy and happiness, and we get happier. It's like some virtuous cycle of deliciousness. So that's been going on all summer.

And it's not, of course, the only thing going on in the world, as we know.

This morning I helped with the cremation of a very close friend, Gail Seneca, who was a big part of this community and who died last Monday unexpectedly at age sixty-two. We did a lot of prayers and

blessings, wrapped her in prayer flags, did all these things, and then she was cremated and burned and turned into ash.

I walked out and—you know, death is so mysterious. Here's this person, including you, by the way, in case you think it only happens to other people. Here's this person that you know and love, and they're in that form, and then they're just not there anymore. It's so clear that she's not that body, that corpse.

I came out and there were those beautiful wispy clouds today. And then I looked, and there was this incredible bush with purple flowers. It was like the earth was saying, "You know, here we are in this mystery."

And you can't really name it or hold on to it, but appreciate every moment of it.

Actually, I met Michael Murphy, who's an old friend, the founder of Esalen. He's in his mid-eighties. I met him in the summer, some time ago, and I said, "You know, are you down at Esalen these days much?" He said no. I said, "So what are you doing these days?" He said, "Well, Warriors games and funerals." That was his answer. When you're eighty-five, that's kind of the territory of it.

And then my daughter, who's thirty-one, went this weekend to a wedding. It was the fifteenth wedding she's been to in three years because her whole cohort of people in their late twenties and early thirties are getting married, and now they're all starting to have babies. It's just like watching the seasons turn as we start to move toward fall. This is the cycle of our humanity. And here we are.

There's an old Chinese poet who wrote something like—I wish I'd brought it with me—he said, "When I was young, I used to talk about the sorrows of the world to pretend that I had some profound nature and something important to say. And now I'm old and I've passed through all those difficulties, and I just smile when I see a flower and love the people walking by." Very, very simple.

So we come together in a temple like this. We're in a meditation class, really. And there's a kind of question for us about human possibility. What do we do with this human life that's given to us? Because not only is there birth and death that I'm talking about, but there's also politics—we won't go any further, but it's there, right? And there's hunger and injustice and warfare. And there's also incredible creativity and millions of acts of generosity on the planet every single day. How do we guide our life as human beings in this human incarnation?

If we don't understand, it's easy to get lost. And there are certain questions that can't be answered by Google. How do we navigate? Because without some sense of wisdom, some sense of understanding of this human predicament, this human life, we can move through life like a boat without a rudder, getting thrown around by the blessings and the curses and the problems and the things. It's very easy to get reactive—in family, that's why they call it nuclear family; in politics; in all kinds of ways. We all know this. And we get lost in that.

And yet who we are—and part of the reason I started with that particular guided meditation—who we are... There I was, sitting this morning with Gail's body. You are not this physical body. You inhabit it, you were born into it, you got issued a body basically. Okay, try this incarnation, see how you like it, what there is to learn. But you are the spirit that came into that body and will leave that body. You are consciousness itself.

When you're caught and identified and reactive to the various things that happen, when you're in the smaller sense of self—it's called in Buddhist teachings the small sense of self—you know what that means intuitively, don't you? It's also called the body of fear: when you're frightened and worried and contracted and reactive. You get caught in things, and basically you suffer, and you also can create suffering for the people around you.

But there's also a way—when we talk about a boat with a rudder—there's also a way to navigate the joys and sorrows of life more wisely. In the Buddhist teachings, one of the summary descriptions of the teachings in Sanskrit or Pali is *sila-samadhi-paññ̃a*, which means virtue, steadiness, and wisdom. These are seen as the practices, the understandings, the ways to move through human life.

Let me describe them a little, because they also speak to this shift of identity. I'll see if I can weave these together in some way.

So virtue is the first practice that allows us to move through the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, creating well-being and happiness for ourselves and others. And it's not about morality or the Ten Commandments and "thou shalt" whatever. Generally, when people say "thou shalt," there's some little voice saying, "You're not going to tell me what to do." So I don't think it works that way. It's much more about...

what brings us happiness and who we think we are. And in the simplest way, it's really very practical. It's hard to sit and meditate after a day of killing and stealing and lying. It doesn't work very well. You can't quiet your mind. You don't sleep well. First of all, it doesn't affect your body and mind in a good way to cause harm to yourself and cause harm to others.

But more than that, when you live with integrity, when you speak what's true, when you act in ways that don't cause harm to yourself or other people, it changes your sense of yourself. Because when you have that as a rudder, as a center—when you undertake the training or the practice to not cause harm through your speech or your actions to yourself or others—then when difficult things come and you remember that, instead of reacting, something shifts. Instead of being caught in "I'm angry" or "I need this" or "I'm addicted" or "I want this," it's as if who you are is bigger than those forces.

Your identity shifts from being caught in those things to being more like what we did in the meditation tonight—becoming the loving awareness that says, "Okay, I could get angry about this, or I could be upset, or I could hurt somebody because I feel so hurt, or I need this fix, whatever it is. But there's a recognition:

this is not healthy for me or another. This would cause harm to me or another." And so you shift your sense of yourself from being the one who's reactive to becoming the loving awareness that says, "You know, I don't think so. I don't think this is the way to live."

When you sit and meditate, it's not to have some particular state, but to quiet yourself enough that your conscience and your wisdom and your understanding can show itself to you. And you know how great it is to talk to somebody who has integrity, who speaks the truth. How beautiful it is to be with somebody who has that kind of integrity.

And then of course it gets more wonderful. Remember a couple of years ago, there was one of the many terrible mass shootings in America—the man who went into an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and shot ten little schoolgirls, five of whom died. This was in the news; everybody heard this story. Within hours of the shooter entering that one-room school and shooting the ten girls, killing five, and then himself, the Amish community forgave the killer and his family. News of the instant forgiveness stunned the outside world almost as much as the incident itself did. Some worried that hasty forgiveness was emotionally unhealthy. But members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor.

A grandmother laughed when the reporter asked if this forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually met and thought we had a meeting to plan this forgiveness?" As the father of a slain daughter explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words. It is simply what we do now." Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were few words, but it was primarily the hugs, the gifts, and the mere presence—an act of grace that communicated Amish forgiveness. Of the seventy-five people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day before. And Amish people contributed to a fund for the shooter's family.

You start to hear this and you realize: what does it mean to live with a core of integrity, with your values clear, to not cause harm even if others do? As Booker T. Washington said, "Never let them pull you down so low as to hate them"—to not let your own heart be poisoned. And in the Dhammapada, in the beautiful verses of the Buddha, it says: "The scent of jasmine, rose bay, and sandalwood travels only as far as the wind, but the perfume of virtue rises even to the heavens."

This is the first piece of how to live wisely. And you can't do it without quieting yourself and realizing that all the reactions are not who you are. Who you are is wiser and bigger and more loving than that.

Then the second—samādhi—really means quieting the mind so that you can listen, so that you can see clearly, so that you can understand. And you quiet yourself not so much through effort. "I'm going to quiet myself now. Let's see, how many minutes do I have to do this?" We used to do that actually in the monastery. You know how it is with young guys—competitive meditation. "I can sit longer than you and not move." You get very concentrated, but then it passes. It's not about that.

It's something much more tender. It's a willingness to step outside of our social identity and our busyness identity, which we all have—texting and our screens and all the things that we tend to, which is all fine. But also to walk in the mountains, to sit quietly, to fill the bird feeder or walk the dog or play with a child or just sit quietly, to listen to a piece of music, and mostly just to stop and listen to your own heart. To have a conversation with your heart in some way, and to find your way to quiet your mind.

Because when you do, then you can see clearly. Then your conscience speaks to you. Then your wisdom body, that loving awareness, is accessible to you. And without it, the mind gets stirred up—like mud in water. You can't see clearly.

And when you stop, the mud settles a little bit, and then you can see.

Here's a poem from Jane Hirshfield, a wonderful poet and friend in Mill Valley, about tenderness and inspiration, and how to quiet yourself:

Think of those Chinese monks' tales: years of struggling in the zendo, and then a clink while sweeping up of stone on stone, and poof—enlightenment.

Emily Dickinson's wisdom: "Truth in Circuit Lies." Or C. Grant's *Common Birds and How to Know Them*, New York, Scribner's, 1901:

The approach must be by detour, advantage taken of rock, tree, mound, and brush. But if without success this way, use artifice. Throw off all stealth's appearance, watchfulness. Look guileless, a loiterer, purposeless. Stroll on, not too directly gazing at the bird, avoiding any gaze too steadfast. Or failing still in this, give voice to sundry whistles—chirp. Your quarry may stay on to answer you.

It's lovely, from the birding book, to say you don't go grasp the bird. You wander about with a kind of sidelong glance. Oh, there's a little bird over there—but you don't really let them know that you're looking.

Or be briefly tried but stymied, give it up, do something else. Leave the untrappable thought, go walking. Ideas buzz the air like flies. Return to sit. A fox trots by with a cream-dipped tail and red fire legs doused watery brown. Enlightenment, wrote one master, is an accident—though certain efforts make you accident-prone.

There's something about us as human beings, especially in modern times, that needs to find ways to still ourselves, to quiet ourselves—for the sake of our children, for the sake of the earth that needs to be listened to, for the sake of one another and all the differences that make us up. Because no amount of outer technology—nanotechnology, space technology, biotechnology, computers, this whole vast amazing development we have—is going to stop continuing warfare, continuing racism, continuing destruction of the environment, continuing tribalism. Those arise out of the human heart. And the outer developments that are so remarkable now have to be matched by inner human development.

To do that means we have to learn to listen, to hear our interdependence, to feel our connection with life,

to see with clarity, to listen to conscience—because there's a lot of other... I think the technical Sanskrit word is BS that's out there. You know what I'm saying. And so that too becomes important to us.

To live a life that's wise requires a non-harming virtue. It requires a way of quieting ourselves. And when we do, what happens is that we get bigger—like we did in that meditation, at least for those of you for whom it was the right practice tonight. There are lots of other practices, so if it wasn't, do something else. But you step out of the small sense of self, the body of fear, all these thoughts and worries, and you realize there is a kind of vastness that, as the mind quiets, allows you to see—not just caught up in your own personal stuff, but something bigger. The turning of the seasons. The love that's big enough to hold it all.

And then, of course, it gets more difficult, because you go to wisdom, and wisdom is really the question of mystery. Things are impermanent. Standing there in Mill Valley by the crematorium oven with this body and the Buddha's words: it seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not.

This is one of the big mysteries. In fact, I think it's in the Mahabharata—there's a conversation, maybe between Krishna and Arjuna, and they ask, what are the great mysteries of the earth? And Krishna answers: one of the great mysteries is that people can see others die all around them and still think it won't happen to them.

Things are impermanent, and they're uncertain. My teachers loved uncertainty. My teacher Ajahn Chah, whatever questions we would ask—profound or mundane—regularly he would smile and say, "It's uncertain, isn't it?" Especially if you had a really pressing question. It was a beautiful thing. It just opened the gates to realize that we don't actually know. Some things we know.

I have this guest card, plastic, that I got at a hotel in a developing country. It says: "Dear Guests, It is our pleasure to provide you with a stamp postcard for sending out to your loved ones around the world. Please leave the postcard at the desk or to receptionist after filling up the address and your greetings. We will be glad to mail for you. Note: Due to a poor postage system, your postcard may take some time to reach, or even may not always reach your address. Hotel Management."

That's kind of human life, really. It's just how it is. There's ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, birth and death, sweet and sour. Duality is woven in this way, and this is what we get in human incarnation.

So how do we work with this? Here's a little more meditative and kind of wisdom strategy. It says, being rather practical, that there are different strategies for releasing ourselves when we're caught in the small self and the body of fear. The metaphor used is of a poison tree. There's a tree whose berries are poison. The first strategy is to cut the tree down so nobody gets poisoned—you don't eat the berries, you just get rid of it.

That's one level. Then the next strategy says, but trees are beautiful. We need them to exchange carbon

dioxide and oxygen. Trees have all kinds of uses—let's not cut it down. Let's just put a little fence around it with a sign that says, "Don't eat the berries. They're poison for human beings." That way we're not harming the tree, and no one else is harmed. More gracious.

And then there's the person who wanders along and says, "Oh, I've been looking for a tree like this! These are the berries that, if you take them and grind them up and add a little sulfur and whatever the right ingredients are, become the medicine that cures some of the most difficult diseases of the world." This poison becomes something of value.

So that's the metaphor. How does mindfulness and shift of identity work with it?

At the first level—the cutting down part—you have things arise, as we all do: your fears, the repeated stories, the self-judgment, the anger, the addictive patterns, the kinds of delusion and confusion, the prejudices that are part of your life. And of course, the first step is simply to see them. Just like seeing the tree, you need to actually recognize, "Hmm, these things may not have my best interest in mind, these thoughts. They're actually not on my side. They're old habits." You may know who put them there or where you got them, but they arise and they're painful. They cause you suffering; they cause others suffering.

So first, like the Buddha under the tree of enlightenment, when all the difficulties arose—personified as Mara, the Indian archetype of all the difficult energies of life—the Buddha would say, "Oh, is that you again, Mara? Mara in the form of fear, Mara in the form of anger, Mara in the form of greed and grasping, Mara in the form of self-judgment. Oh, I see you, Mara."

Sometimes all that's needed is to say, "I see you," and who you are becomes the loving awareness—you're not so caught anymore. Does that make sense? That's partly why we meditate, to free ourselves.

But then sometimes, at this level, you may actually need to cut the damn tree down.

I'm remembering this story. Some decades ago, I was teaching at Esalen, and one of my teachers and friends, Zen Master Seung Sahn—a Korean Zen Master who had a big center in Providence and centers all around the country—came to visit. Among his students was a couple I was close to. They both became his devoted students. Then they went through a really messy breakup and divorce.

The man was just brokenhearted because this woman had left him for some other young guy. The Zen master was very tender and compassionate, consoling him during that breakup when they were all there together.

Then the Zen master went away, traveled back to Korea and around the world, and didn't come back for almost a year—nine or ten months. When he returned, we all came to greet him. I was back there again, including this fellow whose wife had left him. The master looked at him and said, "How are you?" You could see his face was morose; he was still in the middle of grieving.

The master said, "Oh, I brought you a present." He reached in his bag and pulled out this beautiful mala with beads of Kuan Yin on it. "Here, give me your hands." He placed it in his hands, then hauled off and smacked him across the face and shouted, really loud, "Let her go!"

We were all stunned—our jaws dropped open. I'm not saying this is good therapy or anything like that. But you know what? It worked.

There was just a shift. It was like, "Okay already. Enough self-pity. Enough grieving—it's fine. It's time to just put it down." It was as if he said, "You're bigger than that. Who you are is not just that. It's not all that identification and all the tears."

Who you are is much bigger than that. And he could see it. It was kind of astonishing.

So that's the first level, where you recognize what's there, and in recognizing it, you let it go. Or at times, as in twelve-step work, you simply say, "I'm not going to drink anymore." You just don't do it.

Then the next level, where you put the fence around the tree, is the level of compassion—in which you see that everything deserves compassion. Every single thing.

I was visiting Ram Dass in June. Ram Dass is a very dear friend. He has this giant altar in his living room. He lives in this house in Maui, in his wheelchair, where he's been for seventeen years since his big stroke. He can still talk—with some aphasia, but he can speak pretty well. And he's just very, very loving.

On this altar are pictures of his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, and Ramana Maharshi, and Ananda Mayi Ma, who was one of the greatest saints of the last century in India. You know, this Baba and that Swami, and images of the Buddha and Ganesh and Saraswati—it's a polyamorous altar, basically. But also on this altar, with all these pictures of Meher Baba and all these great beings, is a picture of John Boehner and one of Dick Cheney. And Ram Dass says, "If you're going to practice love, you've got to stretch a little bit."

James Baldwin says, "Love takes off the masks." It really asks something much deeper than the superficial—to look with the eyes of compassion at every single being. And then the poison starts to get transformed into medicine, in some way, when you bring that kind of tenderness and care.

And if you want to turn it into an even deeper medicine: in Tibet, they pray for suffering. "May I be granted enough suffering that the great heart of compassion will awaken in me." Bring it on, baby, in some way. That's a tough prayer. It is.

The goal in spiritual life isn't to avoid suffering. Anybody succeed at that, by the way? Raise your hand. I'm just checking. The goal is to use suffering as medicine—to transform your heart and to remember who you really are.

There's a poem from Deena Metzger, a wonderful friend. Some of you may have seen the image—this was back in the seventies or eighties—of this woman who had a mastectomy and had this huge dragon tattoo

across her body. And there she is standing with one breast and the dragon up her body. Quite wonderful, a beautiful being. She says, "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep. And we will have rain, and we will begin again."

There's something in her poem that says: show me the sufferings of the world, and I will transform them into freedom. And that's really the third turning of the medicine.

You do it through this shift of identity, where you realize that what you face and what you go through is not so personal. It's part of the human journey.

In this new book that I'm just finishing, I tell the story of this woman, Whitney Williams, who went back to the Midwest to take care of her parents in rural Illinois. Her dad was in the early middle stages of Alzheimer's, and her mother had broken her hip and was having trouble. Her only sibling was her brother, and all he wanted to do was not get involved—he'd just call his sister and say, "You take care of it." You know that kind of family dynamic.

So she took a month off from work. The house was in shambles. Her father couldn't care for himself very well. Her mother's fracture was still healing. She knew they couldn't stay there, but it was her childhood home. It was her parents. And she was facing the reality of their aging and their demise.

So she walked up on a hillside nearby that she'd known growing up, and she just started to weep—because she didn't want to lose her childhood home. She didn't want her parents to get sick and die, or have to leave their house either.

And then she looked out. There was this vast landscape—the little town, the farms, the cumulus clouds, the dotted clusters of other farms in the distance. And somehow she felt held more in the vastness than when she was inside the house. She could instinctively feel how everything had its seasons.

Arriving, departing, flourishing, struggling, coming into being, fading away. And she began to reflect: how many other people are in this same predicament?

As she breathed more with this kind of ease, her mind opened further. She realized, "I'm not the only one with aging parents. There are seven million others this very day in this country." The space opened, and she felt somehow more trust. We can do this. We know how to do this.

With this spacious heart, we remember a bigger picture. Even though illness strikes, even though parents are dying, even though some form of loss comes—and it will come—we can also recognize that it's part of the rhythms of life. Among the multitude of humans, many like us are experiencing loss or pain or change or needing renewal. And the world keeps turning. The farmers growing food, the markets trading, the musicians playing. We live amidst a great, ever-changing paradox. Breathe, relax, one day at a time.

Whitney realized all of these things and cried again, her heart tender—this time tears of relief. Somehow we move from our separateness to sense both the vastness and the love that propels life itself, and that we

are a part of it.

I'll tell this story briefly, because I've got other miles to go here tonight, of my friend Salam, who was in a prison in the Middle East. He'd been a journalist and was imprisoned and tortured. He almost died from his torture at one point. He said, "I did die, actually."

I met him because he was doing hospice work. I said, "What are you doing here in the Bay Area doing hospice work?" He said, "Well, I like to sit with people and let them know that it's perfectly safe." I thought, well, that's interesting. Tell me.

He said, "I was in this prison on and off for a long time—beaten, tortured. And then one day, even my medical records say that I died. This guard, I'd done something that angered him, and he was kicking and beating me, blood coming out." He said, "And I floated out of my body, as people do in accidents." Even in meditation it's possible—you can train yourself to have out-of-body experiences. You know you're not just the body.

He said, "I was floating on the ceiling watching the boot kick the body and all this, but it was very peaceful." He said, "And then something really interesting happened." I sat up. "Oh?" He said, "Yeah, then it was as if a bubble popped. I was no longer located as a self witnessing, observing this. That sense of self burst open, and I became everything. I was the green paint flecking on the prison wall. I was the goat you could hear outside on the hillside. I was the boot kicking the body. I was that body lying there."

He said, "This immense joy came to me, because I knew that who I was, was everything. I was life, and I could never die." When he came back in a broken body at the bottom of the cell, he healed and eventually got out. He said, "I couldn't fight for one side or another anymore." He had been of one particular group. He said, "I married a woman from the opposite side. And that's the closest thing I could come to saying: this is what I understood."

You are loving awareness itself. It's born into you—spirit, consciousness, this mystery within. Oh, what's scientific about saying the brain makes consciousness? Well, that's a sort of small story. Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, said you either need a big story or no story at all when you're facing the mystery.

You're loving awareness.

When the Buddha was walking down the road after his enlightenment—at least as this story is told, and we're just telling stories, right?—a man came up to him and said, "Wow, you seem like this amazing being." The Buddha was a handsome prince, and obviously he was in a good mood after his enlightenment. The man asked, "Are you some kind of wizard or magician?"

No. Are you a guru? No, not exactly. Well, you know... Are you enlightened? Buddha said, no. Interesting. Are you a god? No. Are you a man? No. What are you? And the Buddha looked back and said, "I am awake." And the word Buddha means awakened.

So he wasn't claiming anything—I'm this or I'm that. What I am is awareness itself, which is what you are. And you know this. You've walked in the mountains, or you know it from when you gave birth to a child, or you sat in that mystery with someone as they died. Or when you took peyote or some other substance—come on, let's fess up, right? Or when you heard that amazing piece of music, or were making love. You all know it because it's true. It's absolutely true. It's your nature.

And we become reduced. In fact, I think it was Alan Watts who said the mind is actually a reducing valve. The mystery is so extraordinary and around us all the time. I was looking at those flowers this morning after the cremation, and I could have just drowned in the purple of those flowers. What is a flower? Why does the earth—the Japanese poet says the earth laughs in flowers. How can it be that it makes all these colored flowers? Yes, there's evolution and I believe in that and all of that, but it didn't have to do that, you know. This is really extravagant. The earth deals in extravagance. It's so mysterious.

And we wake up to it. Little children have it, this sense of mystery. In Bali they say that the people closest to the gods are newborns and old people. The newborns because they've just come in and so they're, as Emerson said, trailing clouds of glory and seeing everything anew. And the old people because they know they're headed back to that mystery. The people farthest from the gods are middle-aged people with mortgages. But what's true is that that's not who you are. Who you are is something much vaster and much more beautiful than that.

So a couple of poems about death. This is again from Jane Hirshfield. She writes:

The dead do not want us dead. Such petty errors are left for us, the living. Nor do they want our mourning. No gift to them, not rage, not weeping. Return one of them, any one of them to the earth and look. Such foolish skipping, such telling of bad jokes, such feasting—even a cucumber, even a single aniseed, a feast.

There's something so blessed about every moment and every taste on this earth.

And this from Diane di Prima, old friend and Buddhist poet, for Zen Master Suzuki Roshi of San Francisco Zen Center:

After you died, I dreamed you were at my apartment and we ate soba together, you giggling and I slurped a lot. And you said, "Don't tell them I'm not dead," and pointed down the street toward the Zen center.

I don't want them to bother me. We laughed and drank the broth, and I kept that promise. I think they still don't know.

So we're here in this mystery. And it's not about knowledge—it's really about wonder. Emptiness and fullness. And love.

I was talking to a wise elder recently, and one of the things she does with her life—she's been a therapist and healer for a long time—is she's worked often over the years with people whose children have died. Which is both a tremendous and terrible loss, almost unspeakable in some way, and yet it also happens. In

the old days it happened all the time. You had twelve children because you hoped that six survived.

We sort of adopted some families from Laos, my family, because I can speak Lao and Thai and some of those languages. And the first family that we adopted for many years had four kids—and these were the four that were left of their eight children. That's how it used to be. But now we can hardly imagine it.

But this elder works with them. And she said one of the most important things that we do, when we get to it in the work, is have them talk to their child. She said it's astonishing the kind of intelligence and understanding that they hear from the spirit of that child to guide them. "Mommy, Daddy, I don't want you to live your life just weeping. I want you to get..." very specific things.

I'm not saying you need to believe this. But I'm saying it because we're in a mystery and nobody can really tell you. But over thousands of years and millions of people and vastly different cultures, there is an understanding that who we are is not limited to this body. And something in you knows that it's true as well.

In the earliest teachings of the Buddha, he says, "I am awake. This is what I am. I am awareness itself. I am compassionate, loving awareness." And then he says, "You too, oh nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember that this is your birthright." And when you remember it, it turns out that that awareness which is who you are is commensurate with—perhaps that's not the right language—is composed of love. They're really not different, because it's the same thing. It's what consciousness is itself.

I remember being in a long retreat where I was doing all these samādhi practices and jhānas, dissolving into love and light, my body disappearing, things like that. And then I was sitting and I went outside. It was a kind of clear night, and I could experience starlight almost like it was touching my body. And then I realized those photons from the stars—just a little scientific thing—they were an expression of love, and that the stars were actually making love with one another by sending out their light to the other stars. I mean, that's just a poem for you, but it was, you know, what do they call them, mystical experiences or something like that. It was very cool.

Test it in yourself. When your identity shifts from the small sense of self—me, my body, my things, my worries, my fears, my hopes, my grasping—and you sense the vastness, the turning of the seasons, the rhythm of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, of gain and loss. When you sense this and breathe into it and rest in that vastness as we started, see whether it's also true that the heart becomes lighter and as expansive as the mind. In Sanskrit, mind and heart are the same word: citta. They both open at the same time.

There's the story of a young monk who'd struggled and struggled to get enlightened, an old Zen story I haven't told for a decade or two. He struggles, but it didn't work very well. And then there was a rumor that there was this wise old master who lived in a hut or a cave way at the top of the mountains. So he

says, "Enough of this hard training in the Zen monastery. I'm going to go find that old hermit who's supposed to be the real deal up there." You know, like the guru in the cave—maybe he will help me. And so he starts trudging up the mountains, walking in these very high mountains. He gets up and up and up and up. And then he sees an old man coming down.

Carrying a big bundle. And he stops the old man and says, "Do you know anything about this old man that lives in the cave?" The old man's face lights up, and the seeker realizes it could be him. The old man says, "Why do you ask?" And the young monk says, "Well, I've been struggling for ten years, meditating, trying to get enlightened. I've come to find an answer. Do you know anything about this enlightenment, old man?"

The old man looks him in the eyes and then just drops the bundle that he's carrying.

And you know how it works in these Zen stories—for some reason, it's very easy. Of course, he did ten years of heart training first. But the old man drops the bundle, and the young man climbing the mountain says, "That easy? You just let it go." And he has this beautiful, liberating moment. All that I sought is just about letting go—not trying to get enlightened, not trying to be something. Just be. Just be the awareness, the love itself.

So then he stands there and turns back to the old man and says, "So now what?" It's a question, isn't it?

And the old man reaches down, picks up the bundle, and walks off toward town.

The reason this story is told with this particular rhythm is that this is the story of the bodhisattva—of the being who remembers who they are and then enters the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands. Comes down from the mountain or the temple, or out from your walk by the ocean, or whatever nourishes you and reminds you of the vastness, and then brings a gift to your workplace, to your family, to political life, to the environment. Because it's all part of you. And you have something beautiful to give because you know that who you are is that too. That you are loving awareness. You are connected with it all. It is your true nature. You have gold in you. You have light in you.

And you know, when you meet somebody who has a lot of light, you know what that's like. I don't mean some sort of woo-woo type light. I mean, because children have it—on a good day anyway, right? That's the way children are. There's just this beautiful light that shines out of people's eyes. That's what was born into you.

Here is another poem from Jane Hirschfield, called "Lighthouse." Just a few lines:

Most lights are made to see by, this one to be seen.
Its vision sweeps its one path like an aged monk raking a garden,
his questions long ago answered.
Far off, night grazing horses, breath scented with oat grass and fennel,

step through the light, disappear,
step through it, disappear again.

The sweep of the lighthouse.

And here's the complementary poem from Mary Oliver, called "The Buddha's Last Instructions":

Make of yourself a light, said the Buddha before he died.
I think of this every morning as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds of darkness,
to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet, even green.
An old man, he lay down between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything, knowing it was his final hour.
Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen.
No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life.
Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.
Make of yourself a light.

So the old man walks with his bundle back into town with bliss-bestowing hands. He brings a tenderness and a compassion for everybody who's forgotten who they really are. He teaches vastness. He rests in openness.

Refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all was lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

And so when you remember who you are, even in the midst of what life brings you—which it does, joy and sorrow—you bring love and wisdom and something that's undying, that can't be taken from you.

So a last little story. This is from a woman bringing her husband to the Mayo Clinic for evaluation. He had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and his body was beginning to shut down. Usually you just have a couple of years.

"We entered the lobby of the Mayo Clinic, the main lobby, and there was a pianist playing. And we realized it was the first song we had ever danced to, a song we had danced to again at our wedding. And my husband Randall put down his briefcase filled with all the doctor's reports and test results, grabbed my waist, took me in his arms, and danced me across the floor all around that lobby.

"And when it was over and folks were applauding, we became aware of how many people had gathered around—were in wheelchairs and with walkers. And we suddenly realized in that spontaneous moment of celebration we had been dancing on behalf of the life and love that lived in each person gathered together in that room.

"I looked around that room lined with those waiting in wheelchairs. We found ourselves thinking of the pool of Bethesda. We imagined Jesus asking us, 'Do you want to be healed?' And we thought we heard him say, 'Then pick up your feet and dance.'"

So let's sit for a moment. Remember who you really are. Rest in loving awareness and the vastness. It is your home.

Thank you for coming. Take time to walk in nature and quiet yourself and to sit and meditate—more than anything, to listen. And come back again sometime.

Thank you. Good night.

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