Monday Night Meditation Talk: The Perfection of Patience

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:42:59

And again, after just a minute or two, you notice that you can sense the breath for a time, but after three breaths or ten breaths, the attention is pulled elsewhere—to planning or remembering or itching or imagining, feeling something.

When the waves are small, let them be in the background. But if a strong wave of experience pulls you from the breath, then let go of the attention to the breath and instead receive this new strong wave as if with a bow. Name it gently: "Oh, sadness, sadness," or "excitement," or "planning," or "remembering," or "itching, tingling." And as you name it, feel the energy of this wave move through your body and mind. After it passes, or you are at ease with it, sense the space of stillness, and then return back with loving awareness to the next breath.

So you rest here in the reality of the present—with this breath, this moment—or with the strong waves, receiving them with the same loving awareness, naming them. And then, after time, return back gently to the breath. This breath, or this moment's experience, receive with loving awareness, with mindfulness that says, "Yes, this too."

Presence. Loving awareness. As the body breathes itself, as the waves of experience rise and pass away in the space of loving awareness. And you're just here—mindful, spacious, acknowledging as it comes and goes. This breath. This wave. And as you do, let things get quieter and stiller around all the waves that rise and fall. This moment met with awareness and kindness.

Let yourself settle and listen in whatever way is comfortable for you. You don't have to remember anything from this. There's no quiz at the end, no exam. But more, listen in a kind of contemplative or meditative spirit, which is to say, let the words and stories come. And if something touches that which you know to be true in yourself, if it's really a reminder of something that you know and value, then that's something worthwhile for you. And if it doesn't seem right, just let it go.

Over the course of this year, in these Monday nights that I'm able to do, I've been working through a series of teachings which are called in the Buddhist tradition the ten perfections, the perfections of the heart. And I like to speak of them also as an expression of our own Buddha nature, of what is born into us, of the beautiful qualities and capacities that every human being is born with and that can be developed or

brought forward, even though we might forget or lose them.

So we've talked about in these past months the quality of integrity or virtue, the quality of generosity of a generous heart, the quality of wisdom, the quality of wise effort—those kinds of qualities. And tonight we get to talk about what's traditionally called the perfection of patience.

Now, this is a tough one, and not just for you. The story that starts these perfections, which I didn't really tell on the first Monday night of this series, is that when one takes a vow to become fully enlightened as a Buddha, it's said that having taken such a vow, in general—and it took the last Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha, more or less this amount of time—

practicing patience and wisdom and loving-kindness and compassion and dedication and truthfulness and generosity and so forth, for 100,000 mahakalpas and four immensities.

And a mahakalpa is described as the length of time it takes if you have a mountain as high as Mount Everest—seven yojanas high, the distance an ox cart can go in a day—and every hundred years, a bird flies across the top of the mountain with a silk scarf in its beak, dragging it across the summit and wearing it down a little bit. When that mountain is worn down, that's one mahakalpa.

So you hear this and you think, all right, I can be patient a little bit, and maybe wise and virtuous once in a while, but 100,000 mahakalpas and then four immensities?

The beautiful thing about it is that it's a mythological number. It's not meant to be literal, because when you hear it, it's impossible. And what it actually means is that you have to understand this not within time, but as an invitation to see something outside of time—something more universal and grand, like the turning of the seasons and the turning of the galaxies themselves.

When you understand it this way, you start to see that these perfections are not something out there to be gained after 100,000 mahakalpas of the bird wearing the mountain down. Rather, they're a kind of flowering that can happen—not because you get better and better at something, but because you discover that this is actually who you are. This is your own true nature.

I was running a retreat and doing a ritual, a ceremony for the empowerment of some new teachers at our retreat hall, which is part of this campus beyond this building. Many of you have done retreats there. It was finished in 1999, so it's been open for seventeen or eighteen years. And I did a quick calculation for the fun of it: How many people come on retreat typically? How many retreat days a year? How many hours during the day? And I realized—oh, 3.4 million meditation hours in that room already. I thought that was very impressive.

So these numbers, mahakalpas and things like that, they actually happen. And they happen to you, because it's not 100,000 years of the bird, but 100,000 breaths. And how many do you pay attention to? And what does it mean in 100,000 steps? Ten thousand moments of looking in the eyes of the people that

you love around you. The invitation from these qualities is to make these moments really alive for yourself, which is really, in part, why we practice.

Normally, one thinks, all right, I'm going to do meditation and I'll get better at it and I'll improve myself and I'll be a better person. And maybe I'll even get enlightened, whatever that is. But maybe I'll find out what it is, right? But then you notice when you're sitting that one of the great desires that arises is the desire to hear the bell. You know it's true.

So this guy goes to the Zen master—a really ardent young man, the most troublesome of all, but the most interesting. He says, "I'm here and I'm really going to do it. I want to practice. How long will it take to get enlightened?"

The Zen master says, "Ten years for you. Ten years."

The young man says, "Ten years? What if I practice really hard and throw myself into it?"

That's when the master says, "Okay, twenty years in your case."

"Twenty years? Isn't there any way I can do this faster?"

"Yeah, for you, thirty years. I can tell."

So we have this idea somehow that the way we're supposed to become something magnificent as a spiritual being or wise person is through some gain, some effort, some making something happen. But it doesn't really work that way. Tennessee Williams wrote, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." There's something that wants to open in us, but it doesn't necessarily require the kind of gaining and effort as much as it does the willingness to be present.

Because we think in our practice, well, if I do it right, I'll fix my personality. We talk about this, right? You go to therapy, you have a coach, you go to the gym, you work out, you have a good diet, you meditate, and you're going to perfect yourself. How is that project going?

And then you start to realize, okay, I guess it's not really working that way. Or you set your goal: I'm going to meditate, and then I'll never be depressed or lonely or angry or needy or greedy. I'll just be holy and wise. Talk to your family members.

See how their perspective on that is.

So far, we just sit more retreats and so forth.

Now the thing is that we live in a culture that teaches us this. We live in a hurried culture. I remember when, for a time—I think it was partly to save energy—speed limits were lowered to 55 miles an hour everywhere. I don't know who it was, maybe it was under Carter or something like that. But then, you know, for us speed freaks—and myself included—gratefully it was raised again to 65 miles an hour. And

now there are places out west in Wyoming and so forth where you can go 80 and 90 miles an hour. Fantastic, you know. This is our culture.

We live in this hurried culture where you're online all the time and people are getting to you and you have to respond right away. Hurry up, hurry up. And so you can do all that stuff so you can have leisure, right? You've got computers so you could get all your work done and have more leisure time. How many people, after you got your computers and your devices, have more leisure time? Raise your hand. Come on, let's be honest. It's not the way our culture works. It's just more, more, more, and quicker and sooner.

And then we have our hurried children. I think about Dr. Elkind, a psychiatrist from Tufts University, who wrote a book about seeing kids who are eight and nine and ten years old with ulcers from stress. I was teaching in China and in Singapore, working with some people from South Korea, and there's a high suicide rate among kids, especially high school and college age, because there is so much pressure. I was giving a talk at the largest psychology department in China, at Beijing Normal University. They asked, "What do we need to talk about?" I said, "Well, why don't we talk about what's happening to the kids?"

But it's not just there, you know. It's here. You've got to prepare for the interviews to get into the right preschool, so you can get your way to Stanford or Harvard. But you've got to start early. And then there are all those things like alphabet cards for your kids and reading programs for infants in the womb. Sing to the kids—don't read to them, please.

Peggy O'Mara, the editor of Mothering magazine, is very wise. She says, "We have a cultural bias against dependency, or against any emotion that indicates weakness. Nowhere is this more tragically evident than the way we push our children beyond their limits and timetables with outside standards." This is when you're supposed to be weaned. This is when you're supposed to be potty trained. This is when you're supposed to do this or that—instead of teaching them to trust themselves. Putting good healthy food on the table instead of saying, "Finish everything on your plate." Give them healthy food and let them learn to regulate themselves.

She says, "Begrudging dependency because it is not independence is like begrudging winter because it's not yet spring. Dependency blossoms into independence in its own sweet time." Our children grow from crawling to walking, babbling to talking, puberty into sexuality. This is the way that life unfolds, and we can trust it.

When you really take a moment to breathe and slow down, you start to feel that it's painful to not honor the natural cycle of things—in your own life, in the life of our children, in the life of the world in which we live.

This is Zorba the Greek: "I remember one morning I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it, and warmed it as quickly as I

could. And the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out, and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled. The wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath, in vain."

It needed to be hatched out patiently, and the unfolding of the wings needed to be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled before its time. It struggled desperately and a few minutes later died in the palm of my hand.

Of course, he's a brilliant writer, and he uses that scene from his life to remind us of something really important for us as human beings—the natural unfolding of our children, of our own bodies, of our aging, of our adolescence, of whatever it happens to be, of the work that we care about.

So it turns out that spiritual practice is not about the perfection of yourself. It's really the perfection of love. And in that, this quality of patience is more the quality of listening—the listening heart, of attending, of presence, of living in the mystery of being alive rather than looking for the goal, whether it's spiritual or some other goal you might have.

From T.S. Eliot again, where he writes: "I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope, for hope would be hope of the wrong thing. And wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing. There is yet faith, but the faith and love and hope are all in the waiting. So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing."

Extraordinary language—the stillness, the dancing.

"Oh nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember the rhythms of life that you were born into. Return to them. Live with that kind of dignity and presence that is your birthright.

So we talk about patience, but really patience is not a very good word. Because patience is like, well, if I wait long enough, something good will happen. People sit in meditation waiting and waiting for something to happen, like waiting for the bus. A better word for it, from Zen Master Suzuki Roshi at San Francisco Zen Center—he said a better word for it is *constancy* rather than patience or impatience, waiting for something.

It's simply a willingness to be present, as we just did in our meditation—to sit and feel this breath, these emotions, these thoughts and stories in the mind, the ones that are skillful and the ones that are unskillful, these experiences in our body that need to be tended to. To begin to trust the unfolding of this body and mind as we become present.

And sometimes, as you know very well, the times when you get impatient or bored or when things seem bad and you want something better to happen, or when they get really difficult—those are the times when you learn the things that the heart needs to know the most.

I was just in Los Angeles and I was in a conversation with a man who had built this very successful and huge real estate empire—half a billion dollars or something, zillions of dollars anyway. It seemed like a lot to me. And he'd quit after a while. He was really successful, on his way to being worth many billions. But he had an autistic child. And he had to stop. There was all the conflict in the family—how do we do this? And what it meant to raise this autistic child.

He looked at me—this child is now about ten years old—and he said, "You know, I have learned more from this child. It changed my life. I was driven. I was lost. And this child required me to quiet myself, to learn what it means to be present for someone in ways that I didn't even know how to do, which then meant I was present for my wife and my other children." And he said, "I can't express to you how important it is to have gone through what at first seemed just a tragedy. But the difficulty of being with this beautiful child—they've brought me my life back."

And we all know this in some way. Some of the hardest things that you've been through are the things that crack your heart open.

So it says in the Tao: "Those who are wise have no mind to fight the Tao. They do not, by their own contrivance, try to help the Tao along." They rest in the present, in the rhythms of life. And this is more the constancy—the willingness to show up with loving awareness, which is the synonym we're using for mindfulness. Where you are, rest in the rhythms of life. And then you drop into your own true nature. Here we are. Wow, what is this that's unfolding?

Now, I could almost tell this as a joke—Carl Jung and Rumi walk into a bar. It's kind of like that. But there's a passage from Carl Jung where he writes: if somebody's trying to get you to do a business deal quickly, and they say you have to sign now—this piece of property, this building, this stock option is going to disappear like that—or someone else is trying to get you to do something, you should be able to look behind that pressure and see who it is. Because you know who's there: the devil. That was Jung's word.

This is Mara tempting the Buddha and saying, "Hurry up, you've got to do it now."

And of course, this is Rumi: A friend remarks to the prophet, "Why is it I get screwed in business deals? It's like a spell. I become distracted and make wrong decisions." And Muhammad replies, "Stipulate with every transaction that you need three days to make sure. Deliberation is one of the divine and holy qualities. Throw a dog a bit of something, he sniffs it to see if he wants it. Be careful. Sniff with your wisdom nose, then decide."

So this is Carl Jung and Rumi in a bar. Anyway, there you are. But you can hear the truth of it—that sense of "hurry up, do it." And where are we going? Honestly, where are you going? If you step back into a little bit of the bigger picture, we're all going to the same place in a little while. So what's the hurry? Why don't we enjoy it while we're here?

Now, in teaching this, of course there is the slow food movement in France. Thank you to the French for

this. And I really do want to love her with a slow hand too. There's always that.

The truth is that I'm a pretty impatient person by temperament. I think quickly. I do things quickly. I don't like being late—sometimes I hate being late if I've promised to be somewhere. I leap up the stairs two at a time, still pretty much. I'm just wired like that, kind of like a hummingbird.

I remember I was teaching at our retreat center in Massachusetts some years ago, leading one of our long three-month silent retreats. We have a two-month silent retreat every winter and spring for about a hundred people. There were a bunch of people who'd come from Europe, and this one guy came in to talk to me. We have these little meditation meetings with students to find out how they're doing and support their practice. He came in and said, "You know, I'm so disappointed." I said, "Oh?" He said, "I've listened to you on CD or cassette tapes or whatever it was back in the day. You just sound so peaceful and mellow. And then I'm watching you here go up and down the stairs, running around. You look like an Italian shoe salesman." Would you like to see our latest fashion?

So when I get mindful and pay attention and notice impatience—it's not just that I'm impatient for the result. There is that, you know, I want the ice cream, or I want the completion of this, I want that to happen. There's that part of it, the grasping. But there's also something else that I notice: it's hard to be present for certain other feelings, like boredom, or the thought that I'm wasting time. You know that thought? Like you're in traffic and you're wasting... I mean, it's really amazing. I'm here, driving down to the Golden Gate Bridge, and there's been an accident or a traffic jam. I can get impatient as we do. Does it help? Do you get there any faster? My body goes, "I don't want this happening." And I go, "Oh, well, look at that." It's hard to actually pay attention to the frustration or the boredom or the emptiness or the loss of time or all those kinds of things.

It really is a question: Who are we if we're not doing things, if we're not accomplishing something?

I'm a kind of serial doer, so I have that doing problem that many people in this culture have. And it's fine to be able to do stuff—it's actually very satisfying. But it's really hard if that's the only song you can play. Who are we if we're not doing things? Who am I if I'm not doing things?

So instead of patience, perhaps the better word is constancy. And maybe the opposite of impatience is not patience, but somehow presence, or trust, or contentment. These are some of the opposites—to be able to begin to trust where you are and say, here's where I am. I'm in a traffic jam. And all these people, all their cars are blocking my way. My car's blocking theirs. I'm part of the traffic jam. You're blaming all of them, but you forget to look at the car that you've added to it, right?

There's the image of the person riding the train who carries their bags the whole way, who won't put them down—as if you're going to get there faster or something.

"You can pick all the flowers," says Pablo Neruda, "but you can't stop the spring." There's something in that verse, especially in these times of genuine concern for the climate of the earth. But there's also some

bigger season that's going on—the earth has its own life and seasons. You can pick all the flowers, but there's something that pushes new life through the cracks in the sidewalk, and that can't be stopped.

Rumi says, "By God, don't be an impatient bystander in this life." Be present for it.

And if you look at little kids, they know this. I was with a little kid who was in a high chair, dropping his spoon over the edge many times to make sure gravity really worked. He's an expert. He's a scientist. Okay, let me see if it works again. And also, he's a psychologist. Let me see if they'll pick it up again. All those things he's studying—a hundred thousand times dropping the spoon off and babbling and trying these things.

So in spiritual life, we might have the sense of progress, of getting better, like in electronics and technology—a smaller, smarter smartphone with more capacities. But the old Zen story describes it differently. A Zen master is there and a student is meditating, and the master says, "Well, what are you doing?" The student says, "I'm meditating so that I can get enlightened. I know that it's possible." And the master picks up a brick and takes out his handkerchief and starts rubbing the brick. The student says, "What are you doing?" The master says, "Well, I'm polishing this brick to turn it into a mirror." The student says, "No matter how you polish it, it's not going to turn into a mirror." And the master replies, "No matter how hard you try in that way, you're not going to turn into the kind of enlightenment that you think you should be. Maybe you should be yourself."

A brick is a brick. We have a certain measure of sorrow. Sorrow is our sorrow. Beauty is our beauty. And when we come into the present, we actually bow to our human incarnation and say, this is it. This is actually it. That's where enlightenment starts—where you are, here and now. And the real openings in spiritual life happen most frequently when we stop trying to make or do or be anything.

I know it for myself. On my own retreats, there gets to a certain point where I just let go and I'm just there. And that becomes in some ways the most beautiful and the most fruitful time. All kinds of things start to open up for me.

And then somebody says, yeah, but what about refugees? What about the war in Syria and South Sudan and the Philippines and Burma? What about continuing racism and injustice?

What about climate change?

The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. But it's pretty hard to bend it these days. It's sort of like it's bending maybe a little bit the other way for a bit. How do we see patience in this? How do we see constancy?

I think there are a few things to say. One is a passage from Thomas Merton that I love to read because it's got so much wisdom in it. He's speaking to a young activist—a frustrated activist—and he says, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless

and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps at times result in the opposite of what you expected. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

That somehow you get quiet enough to listen and say, what really matters to me? And this is the direction I'm headed in. It's not given to you to know how it's going to turn out. But what is given to you is to quiet your mind and tend your heart and sense what is the direction that I want to offer of my life to this world. And then whether it's injustice or climate change or racism or warfare, you can act—but you act in a different way.

You act the way Gandhi acted. And what he did, as we all know from the story, is he took one day a week in silence where he didn't do anything. And he's in the middle of taking apart the entire British empire. There are hundreds of thousands of people marching and people getting killed. "Gandhiji, Gandhiji, you must come! People are dying!" And he said, "I'm sorry, it's Thursday. This is my day off. I can't come. I sit in silence on Thursday." And he sat to quiet himself and to listen in some way to a different channel than the channel of doing—to listen: What matters to me? What do I care about in this life? And how can I align my actions and my words to the Tao, to what's really unfolding, and to the deepest values that I carry?

And you might say, well, that's Gandhi. But I was just also with some Silicon Valley people, including some who run these giant companies—Facebook, Google, that kind of thing. I was talking to the CEO of one of them who said, "I'm taking next week off because we really have to do some visioning about where our corporation and our thousands of employees are going. And I can't do that in my office. I just have to go and be quiet for a while. And then I get an intuition, I get a knowing."

We talked about it, and I spoke with him a few days later after he'd been quiet for some time. He said, "Oh yeah, it's all starting to come." And you know this. Sometimes when you're taking a walk is when all of a sudden you understand something. Or in your dreams, if you remember them.

So there's a shift. It's not that you don't care about the world and respond to it and act in an honorable way. But it's a shift from trying to make it happen with your will to instead opening to what your heart tells you is the wisest thing to do from a quiet place—like Gandhi—and letting your actions then follow something that's more timeless.

Ovid says, "Opportunities are everywhere, and so you must always let your hook be hanging. When you least expect it, a great fish will swim by." So it's not that you just do it, but you also open yourself to listen in a different way.

Now it's also useful to begin to study what keeps us from contentment, what keeps us from presence. How many people would be grateful for the day that you had? There are a lot of people in this world still without enough to eat, without shelter, whose lives are in danger in different ways, or who are sick. If your doctor calls and gives you a diagnosis, and then a few days later you get another call saying, "I'm

sorry, it was a mistake"—you go, "Hallelujah, I have my life back!"

I thought I only had a few months to live. And what do you do? You hug your children, you watch the rain, you look at the light on the golden grasses here—the beautiful late evening summer light that happens for us in California. That outer gold shining to our inner gold.

What really matters in the end? There aren't that many things, you know. Did you love well? Maybe. Did you live fully instead of so much in the future and the past? Did you actually live your moments? And maybe did you learn to let go? Because if you don't learn it now, you're going to have a crash course at some point. It's going to come.

So maybe in this quality of constancy or patience, there's really a trust in the seasons of life. "Don't the leaves fall down just like that," a Chinese poet wrote. In the body opening, in the rhythms of being born and of dancing and singing and working and bringing justice and loving and gain and loss, joy and sorrow and tears and delight that make up our human incarnation. To rest in your Buddha nature and say, yes, this is what we were born into, and let me hold it with loving awareness. Let me be present for it. Let me be part of this unfolding.

When my daughter was six years old, my family went on sabbatical to Asia, as we did about every five years, to live for six months or more. I would work on a book or something like that. We lived in one village in Thailand and another in Bali. When she was six, we were living with a Balinese family, and she went to a Balinese dance school, because all the little girls in Bali were dancing as temple dancers—on Jalan Sugriva in Ubud, back in the late 80s.

We were there for some months, and she learned to do the pendet and some other dances. Before we were supposed to leave, she was going to have a recital with some people coming to watch. It was late afternoon when we arrived, and I brought a video camera. They started to prepare her. First they ritually bathed her and washed her, and they did some prayers over her. Then they put on this beautiful sarong, and they wrapped her body in gold silk about twenty times around. Then they put on amazing jewelry. Then they started applying makeup—more makeup than a six-year-old girl could die for having. She was just smiling like this.

And I'm noticing that the light is fading. I'm not going to get a good video of this. It's going to be dark. Then the dance teacher's wife comes over—she had been my daughter's main teacher—and sticks these gold flowers in her hair, adjusting everything. They're just taking their time. And I'm getting more and more impatient, thinking I need to record this thing.

The dance teacher just kind of looked over at me like any good Zen master and smiled, and they kept preparing her.

Finally, at some point, I remembered. I understood something. Because in Bali, when you dance or when you sing or when you make art—and there's so much art in Balinese culture—you don't do it for the

approval of other people. You're not doing it for your audience. You do it for the gods.

And the beautiful thing is that it doesn't matter how old you are. If you're eighty years old—and I saw one of the greatest dance masters of Bali who was in her eighties doing extraordinary things—or if you're five or six years old, you are dancing for the gods. And therefore, you deserve the same care and the same gold and the same reverence. The teacher's wife took off her own jewelry and put it all on my daughter.

It was magnificent. I don't have the pictures.

But I have the lesson and the memory, and it's something that I'll treasure.

Who are we doing it for, in some way? We are acting and dancing, moving through our life either just to get it all done, to check the things off our list, to do what we're supposed to do, to accomplish all these things. And okay, I accomplished all this—now what? What is this for? Or are we doing it for the dance itself?

Thomas Merton, again, such a wonderful contemplative and writer, talked about his art as a writer. He said, if you write as a sacred act, or you write for the divine, you'll reach many men and women and bring them joy. If you write for men and women, you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world for a little while. If you write for your own self-promotion, you can read what you've written and after ten minutes you'll be so disgusted you'll wish you were dead. Now it may be a little bit of an exaggeration, but you can hear the difference, can't you? And you know it. You know it in the work you do, in the sandwich that you make for your family, in the tending of someone that you care about, in the way that you move through the world.

This is really what this quality of constancy, of presence, of patience is. It's not something out there, and it's not a hundred thousand mahakalpas away. It's this breath and the hundred thousand moments that make up something beautiful in your own life.

And here we are in this turning of the seasons, as we do in the turning of the spheres. We honor the mystery and the rhythms of life. Sometimes I go about pitying myself, as the Ojibwe saying goes that we all know, when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

So when you sit in meditation, it's not so much to gain something. Yes, you can learn to quiet the mind. You can have insights and visions—beautiful things, some of the time. But sometimes you sit and what you get is the tension in your body or the unfinished business of the heart. The tears that need to be wept but you've been too busy to feel them. Or the longing, or the love that hasn't been expressed, and you realize, "I have to tell that person I love them. I haven't done that."

And you take your seat in the rhythms of birth and death and gain and loss and joy and sorrow as the Buddha that you are. And you say, "Oh yes, this is the rounds of human incarnation." And now let me rest in the heart and live from a place of presence, live from a place of understanding.

The culture doesn't help, as we know. I remember when I was young in Massachusetts, where I lived part of the time, they had the blue laws. The blue laws meant that everything shut down mostly on weekends. Then it was just Sunday. Nothing was open. It was a commercial Sabbath. You couldn't order anything on Amazon on that day because Amazon didn't exist. But basically, the society had decided that Sabbath was actually a healthy thing. We used to have this, you know. And every culture has it—there's a Jewish Sabbath and a Muslim Sabbath.

And there's a Buddhist observance on the full moon, quarter moon, new moon—where everything would stop. Every wise culture knows you have to put down the plow, put down the pen, stop your coding or selling and buying, whatever it happens to be, and take the time to listen. Take the time to stop.

Since society doesn't offer this anymore, your own meditation practice becomes your Sabbath. It becomes your way—in the morning or the evening or whenever works for you—to stop. To tune in, to listen in a deeper way, to find your own rhythm and the rhythm of what is around you.

I'm looking for a story here. This is a story about something bigger, but it could be a story about your meditation too, because sometimes it feels like it's working and sometimes it doesn't—whatever your model or ideal about it might be. But if you're sitting there and you're bored or frustrated or doubting, thinking it's not working, you can either believe that, or you can say, "Oh, I get to be mindful of boredom, or doubt, or 'not working.'" Oh, doubting mind—that's interesting. Boredom. Because usually when we're bored, what do we do? Open the refrigerator, right? Or go online or something, because we can't tolerate our loneliness or boredom. But if you say, "Oh, it's not working. Hmm, how interesting. I wonder what's happening that it feels like it's not working"—that's just a thought.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an army veteran. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see that he'd tried to wash up before coming to the social service department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. And although he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores. I wanted to get him into rehab, and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets.

"No, ma'am," he said. "All I'd like is a few dollars and some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town."

The shelter had fifty beds—cots really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds and nearly a thousand homeless in our city. This is Santa Rosa, by the way. Winter here in Northern California means cold rain and mud, and even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrates everything. His clothes and the bedroll he'd placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of a book he carried were swollen.

I asked how many times he'd tried rehab.

"Two or three, a long time ago," he said.

"Maybe it's time to try again." I explained that I had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. "Besides," I said, "we're months away from warm weather. What else have you got going on?"

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eyes, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard—impossibly hard. But so was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone.

"Shall I?" I asked.

He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left.

I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors and holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

Sometimes you sit and it doesn't seem like it's working, and then you've got to sit again. You do it because where else are you going? If you can't be here for these moments—for the eyes of the people that you care about, for the colors at dawn if you get up early, for the smell of the bay trees as you walk out into the parking lot and the moon that starts to shine tonight, getting fuller—what is it for?

So this isn't speaking about becoming passive. It's really about your ability to be present so you can respond. So you can plant the seeds that matter to you in this beautiful world, no matter what else is happening.

And again, from Thoreau, he says, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed planted there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

And so you plant your seeds in all the different ways that you do. It's not passive at all. It's about sensing the seasons. And then something beautiful and unstoppable, which is life itself, which is what you are, comes into you. It becomes part of who you are. And there's a dignity and a graciousness and an ease and a peacefulness in it because there's some great trust.

I've been training teachers now for almost forty years, and we've had a whole succession of teacher trainings here. We've just started the latest Spirit Rock teacher training for twenty new retreat teachers, and they're almost all teachers of color because it's been very clear that our community is not only not diverse, but also that somehow we've been collectively unconscious about the need to live in a diverse society and to make it who we are and not just some ideal out there or some other place. So one of the things that seems really important is to have the folks who sit up here and teach really represent everybody, not just some subset of the white community. It's a beautiful group. I'm very excited about it.

But the thing that I said to them, and to my colleagues who are new at training teachers, was this: we really don't train them much. I mean, we give them great lectures and teach them Buddhist history and tools that are helpful—when people are in meditation, how you can help them open their hearts and quiet their minds. But mostly, they learn it by doing it, like any apprenticeship. They get nervous and they practice and they learn.

And the beautiful thing is that it's completely trustworthy. I've had people come in who have a very deep meditation experience of realization and understanding and good hearts and all kinds of beautiful qualities, but they're shy and timid and they say, "I don't know if I can talk, I don't know what I have to offer." Those are the best kind, actually. They're kind of the real ones. And I watch them flower. And I don't actually have to do much. I just have to provide the support and say, "Yes, you have it."

The beautiful thing is that you have it. All the qualities necessary for awakening, the perfect emotions and the perfect body and the perfect experience—they are what you have. You have all that's needed to awaken. And you have these beautiful qualities in you. So to meditate isn't to have a particular experience, but to remember that you can be present for this life in an entirely different way—in a loving and compassionate and wise way.

Now I've got a lot more stories, but I'm not going to tell them. Maybe one poem from Ikkyu, the Zen poet. He says:

Every day I hear the priests chant the sutras.
They should learn to read the love letter
sent by the wind and the rain, the blossoms and the moon.

So it's not the words in the text, but really the attention to the world that is, as my poet friend Alison Luderman says, "nibbling your ear like a neglected lover." Come back, be present for it.

And being present, by the way—the last thing before I read our final story—is that being present doesn't mean it's going to be pleasant. The idea of "Be Here Now," you know, that book. I just came from visiting Ram Dass, which was really wonderful, in Hawaii. Trudy and I went to spend time with him because he presided over our wedding a year ago. We decided to go back and visit him. He's eighty-five, in his wheelchair for the last eighteen years. Still aphasia—he can speak, but it's limited some, although his mind is very clear. But he's just all love.

He just looks at you and says, "I love you. I love this life. I love you too. And I love you, and you. And I love this day. And I love the ceiling. I love the exit sign." I mean, he's really funny about it. "I love the floor." He just can't stop loving everything. That part is really wonderful.

And there he says, he looks at you and he says, "You have it. You are it." It's not like you have to be somebody else. No one's ever been like you before in this whole vast galaxy. So you might as well dance.

Anyway, all right. So I have a story as the last one to read, which is from one of my favorite children's books. My daughter said to me, "Dad, you can't read that story." I said, "Why not?" She said, "You're too impatient. It's just not right." So with that caveat, I will read it to you anyway. Maybe my daughter will be patient with me, and maybe not. But that's not my practice.

This is from Arnold Lobel, who's written a series of children's books called *Frog and Toad*. Many of you will know this, and if you don't, they're wonderful children's books. So this is a chapter out of *Frog and Toad*, and you can picture the drawings that come with it.

Frog and Toad are good friends.

Frog was in his garden. Toad came walking by. "What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said.

"Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," said Toad.

"Well, here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog, "and soon you will have a garden."

"How soon?" asked Toad.

"Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. "Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing."

Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "Now seeds, start growing."

Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, "Seeds! Seeds! Listen! Start growing!"

Frog came running up the path. "What is all this noise?" he asked.

"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.

"You are shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow."

"My seeds are afraid to grow?" asked Toad.

I mean, you can hear what good medicine this is for parents, not to speak of the children.

"Of course," said Frog. "Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them. Let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."

That night, Toad looked out his window. "Drat," said Toad.

My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark.

Toad went out to his garden with some candles. "I will read the seeds a story," said Toad. "Then they will not be so afraid."

Toad read a long story to his seeds. All the next day, Toad sang songs to his seeds—in the rain, you can see it raining. And all the day after, Toad read poems to his seeds. And all the next day, Toad played music for his seeds. You can see him playing his violin.

Toad looked at the ground. The seeds still did not start to grow. "What shall I do?" cried Toad. "These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"

Then Toad felt very tired and he fell asleep.

"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. It was morning. "Look at your garden."

Toad looked at his garden. Little green plants were coming up out of the ground. "At last!" shouted Toad. "My seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"

"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.

"Yes," said Toad, "but you are right, Frog. It was very hard work."

This is your Buddhist sutra for the evening. That's right.

If you do anything with this talk, if you listen and it reminds you of something important to you, pay attention also to when you're impatient. Study impatience. It's actually a kind of interesting thing to get curious about. What is this? What keeps you from joy or contentment or being present just with the way things are? Notice the stories that come, or the feelings in the body.

And if you bring loving awareness to that—rather than looking for, or trying to become, patient—notice the other stuff and be patient with that, be present for it. Some very interesting things will happen in a few minutes. Well, how soon, actually? Soon enough, right?

So many other stories, but I think that's enough.

So my friends, says Wendell Berry: every day do something that won't compute and won't count. Love the world. Work out of love.

Work for nothing. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Go with your love to the fields. Lie down in the shade. Rest your head.

So thank you, Gary. Thank you all for your kind attention. It's really a pleasure.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.