Adhiṭṭhāna: The Power of Dedication and Resolve

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:58:11

Good evening to you all. Just take a breath and let the stillness come into the room.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here for this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock Center. The Monday night sitting group is now in its thirty-third year, and I did it every week for about thirty years—now about once a month. It's been a great honor and a pleasure to do so.

If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield, and Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley through the care and commitment of a whole community of people dedicated to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness, or inner freedom of heart, that are central to the Buddhist teachings but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. We have all kinds of programs—retreats and classes and ways to develop compassion, loving-kindness, an inner sense of freedom and well-being for all kinds of groups. And now that you've come here, those who've come for the first time, you can also let this be a place, should you wish to continue, that will serve you in whatever way you'd like.

So it's a pleasure to welcome you.

What we do on Monday night is really quite simple. We sit for thirty-five minutes or so with a little bit of meditation instruction as a reminder, or for those who are new. Then we take a break for ten or fifteen minutes to stretch or relax. After that, there's often a teaching, and on occasion, dialogue or questions and answers.

So let's begin with meditation.

Let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable and stable. If you're in a chair, you might let your feet be flat on the floor and sit upright with some sense of dignity. If you're on a cushion or bench, find any posture that allows your body to rest on the earth with stability and ease.

Once you've taken a stable posture, if you're comfortable doing so, let your eyes close gently for this time. Begin simply by noticing the state of your body, coming into the present here and now with your attention. If you like, you can take one or two deeper breaths to release tension. Notice as you scan through the body if there are areas of tightness or holding that are easy to release, and do so.

Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. You can roll your head in a circle if you wish to release your neck, and let it find a simple upright position. Let the shoulders relax, and let the arms and hands rest

easily.

Feel the weight of your body, the heaviness of gravity, and how the chair, the cushion, the floor completely support you—how you can let go and rest on the earth. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural. Let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness and compassion.

Now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice the play of experience just now. Sensations and feelings, sounds and thoughts, the energy of life. You become the witness of it with loving awareness, with mindfulness, noticing this moment of aliveness.

After just a minute or two, you notice how easily the attention wanders off to thinking and planning and remembering other places. So to deepen the sense of presence and connect body and mind, become aware of how the body is breathing itself. You sit with a graciousness, like the king or queen on the throne, and feel the breath as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it's hard to feel the breath, you can put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall on the palm of your hand.

As you feel each breath gently with loving awareness, you start to feel the rhythm of life that's always present here and now.

Again, after just a minute or two, you notice that the attention is pulled by the waves that rise and fall around the breath. As you feel each breath and return to it, there will be thoughts and sounds, sensations, feelings. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

When one of the waves becomes strong and pulls your attention from the breath, instead of struggling against it, let go of the awareness of breath and receive this stronger experience as if with a bow. With mindfulness or loving awareness, acknowledge it by name: "Oh, sadness," or "tingling," or "planning," or "excitement." As you name it gently—excitement, or remembering—feel the wave move through your body and mind. And when it's passed, or you're at ease with it, return back to the breath.

Rest just here in the reality of the present, aware of the body breathing itself, or acknowledging with loving awareness the waves of experience when they're strong, as they arise and pass away. This breath, this moment's experience—receive it with loving awareness. All things arise and pass in the space of loving awareness. This breath, this moment's experience, just now.

Welcome back. Let yourself quiet down a little bit. It was all that Halloween candy that made you so wild, I can tell.

I also want to say hello to the people who are on livestream tonight who decided to stay in their pajamas and watch from their living room, and to people who are upstairs in the overflow room as well, who are longing to be with you, but they get to stretch out and relax, so it's kind of a good deal.

Please let yourself sit comfortably and at ease and listen tonight. Listening to teachings is a meditation in itself—not because you're supposed to believe anything, and there's no exam at the end, although there is a lovely poem I've read that begins, "In the evening you will be examined on love." So there's a real exam for us.

Instead, you listen to see if what is spoken has any resonance in your heart to what you already know, to what you know to be true. And the rest of it can just let go by.

In the course of this year, over these twelve months, I've been doing a series of teachings on Buddha nature and on the awakened heart and the awakened mind.

Tonight is a particular quality where we're kind of getting through the list. You know, the Buddha was a list maker—the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Five Skandhas, the Six Paramitas, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and so forth. We've talked in previous months about qualities which are really inherent to the heart—generosity and integrity, wisdom and patience, renunciation. Next month it will be loving-kindness. That will be a juicy one before Christmas and the holidays.

Tonight it's a different quality, and I think an important one given that we live, at least some of us, in hard times—outwardly and inwardly. This is the quality called in Sanskrit *adhiṭṭhāna*, which means determination, dedication, commitment, resolve. It is one of the qualities that come out of our loving awareness. It is inherent to the heart when we discover who we really are.

I mean, who are we? How did you get born into this body and mind? It is really mysterious. And then how do we live wisely given the fact that we find ourselves in the human incarnation?

I'm also aware that this is the night before Halloween. One of my favorite memories from Monday nights, when we had our temporary buildings for twenty-five years in the meadow over there—those modular trailers for those of you who were here—was a Halloween night in the 1990s when we had a guest visit from the monks of one of the monasteries, Ganden or Shartse, the Gyuto Tantric Choir—the monks who chant with that whole chord of multivocal tones. I can't really quite do it. Anyway, they came in and they were going to chant for us, and the abbot put his forehead against mine. I guess it was some beautiful transmission or something like that. It was cool. Actually, it was fun.

So they were going to chant for us, which was lovely, and then I noted to them that it was Halloween and the moon was almost full. I talked a little bit about Halloween to these lamas, you know, and the costumes that people wear. They said, "Oh, we have costumes." They were in a van and they pulled out all these skeleton costumes. We went out into the meadow over there under the moonlight, and they did the skeleton dance of the dead on Halloween. I said, "Okay, whoever's central casting, this is perfect. Thank you."

Buddhist teaching is full of ghost stories. When I lived in the monasteries in the forests of Thailand and places in Burma, there's not only lots of stories of ghosts, but a really palpable fear of ghosts. It's part of

everybody's daily experience in some way or other—to be wary of, to try to propitiate, to make sure the ghosts are happy.

Of course, being a young and rude Westerner at the monastery, I said, "Ghosts? Who believes in ghosts?" And I went and sat out in the charnel ground all night and said, "Okay, come on, bring it on, ghosts, whatever." I didn't see anything. They used to tease me about it. They said they saw my white skin and ran away, or something like that. Or maybe it was my big nose and they ran away.

But there were so many stories. My teacher's teacher was this very famous monk in Laos who used to go around, as Milarepa did, into areas where people were frightened by spirits. There are all these stories of him going into caves and being confronted by huge demons. He looked at the demon and said, "You think you're powerful? You don't even know who you are." And the demon says, "Huh?" He said, "Yeah, your power is really crude. You don't have any power over karma or dharma or anything important. It's just crude power. Do you want to know something?" The demon got interested, and he said, "All right, I'll teach you. I'll teach you how to meditate." So there are all those kinds of stories.

But I'll tell you a more modern ghost story, just because they're true. A good friend of mine who was a monk for a time in Burma became the director of one of the largest hospices in America.

He worked with Ram Dass for a long time as well. And one day, a family came to see him in the morning and said, "Our father is close to dying." Their dad was in his mid-eighties. "But we have a dilemma. His younger brother, who was seventy-nine, was killed in a car accident yesterday, and we don't know whether to tell him. He's very close to dying and it would upset him. What should we do?"

So my hospice director friend said, "Well, let's go and see how your dad's doing." They walk into the room and he's lying there, his last day or two, very weak. "Hi Dad." They pay attention to him and so forth. And then he raises his head and says, "Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "My brother died." They were shocked. "How do you know?" He said, "Oh, I've been talking to him all night long."

So who are we? Really, who are you? What do you think you're made of? Do you think you're this body made of whatever it is—hamburgers or kale or whatever your diet is? I mean, come on. There's something much more mysterious about life than we ordinarily touch.

I have this beautiful passage from Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, written years ago, where she says: "The secret of seeing, the pearl of great price—I would stagger barefoot across hundreds of deserts after any lunatic at all if he could help me to find it. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. It always comes as a revelation, a gift, a surprise." And she says that then you see what was ordinarily before your eyes, pulsing with light. It's filled with light. She says it's possible in deep space to sail on light, the light of the solar wind. Particle or wave, it has a force. You rig a giant sail and you go. And the secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind, hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, wedded,

translucent, broadside to the merest puff, illuminated by the light.

We do live in this mystery, and things are glowing with life. Actually, anything that you look at doesn't quite exist that way. Your brain really creates it. The eyeball is always moving—it's not like a camera that just gets an image. It's actually always fluctuating. And then the colors that go on the retina and travel up through the optic nerve to that part of the brain—the brain really constructs what you see. So what is it to be alive, and who are we in this mystery?

If we take that as a kind of deep spiritual question, then this quality of adhiṭṭhāna, dedication or determination, becomes a question: To what are we dedicated?

If you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it starts with security, food, clothing, and shelter, then social needs, and at the top is spiritual needs. But it often can be reversed. When you look at Viktor Frankl coming out of the concentration camps, he said, "We who lived through the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts, comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they showed the greatest and truest reality of human spirit of all—the possibility to choose your spirit, no matter what the circumstance."

You see it in his life. You see it in the life of people like Nelson Mandela and others who, in spite of not having security or food or whatever, lived from and for the spirit. That's what they were dedicated to.

And so we begin to reflect in our own way in spiritual life: What are we dedicated to? What are our own values? Of course, there's a kind of conundrum, because a lot of spiritual teachings talk about non-attachment, which is a very good thing. Being attached and grasping doesn't make people happy. You may have noticed that when you get attached to your children being a certain way, for example—they don't necessarily want to be the way you want them to be. They want to be themselves. The same with your partners. You may have noticed that as well.

So how does dedication and determination, resolve and commitment, work with non-attachment?

The game, you see, is somehow to remember your true nature, to remember that you are consciousness, that you are loving awareness. But as my dear friend Ram Dass likes to put it, "Remember your Buddha nature and your social security number." There are actually multiple dimensions to our experience. If you only remember your social security number, you're in trouble—plus it was stolen last week anyway, so you're in more trouble. But if you also only think, "Oh yes, it's all light and holy," and don't drive on the right side of the street, you'll be in trouble too.

Here's a story from Robert Johnson, the Jungian analyst and author of *He*, *She*, *We*—all these wonderful little mythological books. He said:

"Years ago when I was in rural India, before it got modernized, I was quite sick with a high fever and great pain. They took me to a hospital, and the man at the hospital must have seen my apprehension because he

tried to assure me that they were a very modern facility. 'We have a thermometer,' the nurse reassured me. I later found that they had one thermometer that they passed from patient to patient. In between, they held it under the water faucet. My temperature reached 105. I had terrible diarrhea and cramps. Somehow, after ten days, I survived. The bill was twenty-eight dollars.

"While I was hospitalized, my new friend from the village where I had come to live, Shankar, came every evening to visit me and slept every night on the floor under my bed. Of all my experiences in India over the next twenty years, this was perhaps the most touching. When I was sick, my friend slept near me so that I wouldn't be frightened or lonely, or to see if I needed anything. Now in America, if I get sick, I can't get anyone to stay with me for very long, not to speak of sleeping under my bed.

"But Shankar came and not only slept on the mat but tended me. Then one day he stood at the foot of the bed and said, 'Robert, I want to tell you a story about Baba and his friend. This friend got very sick, and Baba came and stood behind him and said, "Only say the word and I will go to die so you can live." Robert, for you, I am Baba. You only have to say the word and I will die in our friendship so that you can be better.'

"It was like one of those stories out of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights. At first I was shocked by this. How can you hold that kind of an offer? But I had the presence of mind to say, 'Thank you, Shankar, for this great gift. Please don't do anything rash now. I think I have enough vitality left in me that both of us can continue to live.' And I did. But I never forgot the depth of the tie and the profundity of the relationship implied by this generosity I had never seen or known before."

And so here we are—these translucent beings made of consciousness, but also tending one another in this human form. If it's not attachment, then what is it? It's dedication. It's love. It's connection.

I talk about this when I've done weddings for people. If you're attached to the way a person is supposed to be, you will eventually get in conflict. "I need you to be this way, and you need to do this for me"—it doesn't run very well as a relationship. But if instead you are committed—committed to love, to care, to bless, to offer and foster your support to one another, not with expectations but with a steadiness of heart—it changes everything. When people love us with a steadiness, when we love with a steadiness, it changes everything.

Tori Murden, the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean, said, "If you know what it means to be out in the middle of an ocean by yourself in the dark, scared, then it gives you a feel for what every other human being is going through. I rowed an actual ocean. Other people have just as many obstacles to go through."

So dedication. What does it mean as human beings to be dedicated? And to what do we become dedicated? Dedication is really an expression of the awakened heart that says this life I experience, this embodied life, has certain things that I value, that really matter. Rather than saying, "I should be this way," it

becomes, "This is what I care about." And of course, you learn this quality and find it supported by your training in meditation.

Zen master Suzuki Roshi writes: "Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease. You don't know what to do. You can't lie in bed. Normally the most comfortable place for you would be a warm, comfortable bed. You pace up and down, in and out, but this doesn't help. Actually, the best way to relieve your mental suffering is to sit in meditation, even in such a confused state of mind. If you have no experience of sitting in this kind of difficult situation, you're not yet a true meditation student."

No other activity will appease your suffering. In a continuous practice under a succession of agreeable and disagreeable situations, you will realize the marrow of meditation and acquire its true strength.

And so it's not that one practices in order to have a particular experience, but rather to learn this capacity to be present for the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows that make up human life.

Just last night I saw the film *Jane* at the Raphael Theater, about Jane Goodall. If you haven't seen it, it's really quite marvelous. They found a hundred hours of film that was shot in the 1960s by her husband, who was a brilliant and celebrated filmmaker—footage they thought had been lost for a long time—and used this to make a film. So you see a lot of her going there to Gombe and beginning to try to watch what chimps were doing. No one had ever done it in the wild before, at least not Europeans, not white folks. I'm sure that there were African people who lived there who knew the lives of chimpanzees much better, but no scientists, no researchers prior.

And the thing that you see in it is how long it took her to make a relationship with the chimps. There were no dating apps, you know—she couldn't swipe on it or anything. She had to trapse through the rain and sit under the bushes. And they would run away each time. And she would just sit there. And she did it again and again and again for months and months and months. She was asked, "Didn't you get frustrated?" She said, "I did. But Dr. Louis Leakey, who hired her, found that she had a considerable quality of patience." She said, "I just knew that if I stayed long enough and still enough, at some point we could start to relate." And they did. It's a beautiful account of this.

Your capacity to be present is larger than you know, because your awareness is larger than you know. It contains everything. You are spirit itself. You are consciousness born into this body. And you also carry within you, in your DNA, generations of ancestors who've survived everything. You are a survivor—it's there in you. You have strength. You have courage. You have stamina. And even people who are weak and sick, when it comes down to it, often there's a kind of rousing of amazing strength that you can see. It's just there in you.

I think about my grandparents and great-grandparents, whom I knew—I knew several of my great-grandparents quite well, as they lived into their nineties, so I knew them into my twenties. They'd come over on boats in the 1890s as teenagers. They left Russia or Ukraine or places where there'd been

pogroms and anti-Semitism and so forth. Left their families, came as teens, knew they would never go back—and they did that, you know. It's not like moving from Marin over to Berkeley. There are generations of human beings who have survived and struggled and brought life to you in the form that you are. And you carry this in you. So this is part of what it means to awaken—to realize and recognize this.

I'm also aware of how many people in our neighborhood have been affected by the fires. How many people lost their homes. Or have people close to them who lost homes and places in fire. I know you're here. So many—dozens. And many, many more.

I was a reporter at the Sarasota newspaper in Florida, where, as a cub reporter, I spent a lot of time covering fires. One day I parked my car behind the police line where reporters were supposed to stop and walked around until I found a way into the wooded area where the woods were blazing. Helicopters flew overhead, the pilots swooping low to fill buckets with water from a pond and drop them onto the blaze.

With the fire sweeping across hundreds of acres, firefighters were focusing on directing the course of the fire rather than attempting to put it out, limiting injuries by instructing people still in their homes to evacuate. However, there was one woman, Mrs. Rosa Garcia, whose house I happened to be standing beside, who simply refused to go. Her husband was at work, her children at school.

Now, this isn't to say everybody could have done what she did—there were those huge winds that would have made it impossible. But in this particular situation, you could. When she dropped off her kids at school that morning, when she said goodbye to her husband, she'd had no idea what she would do or what she would be capable of doing that day. From the outside, she looked like a completely ordinary woman, home on a Wednesday afternoon doing her household chores until the kids returned. But on this day, she defied the authorities who told her to leave, stood in the line of a tremendous fire, stood her ground armed with no more than a hose and a broom, and saved her home.

I think of this woman often, not because she was a heroine on the order of Martin Luther King or Rachel Carson, but because she was an ordinary person who was able to find remarkable strength in herself. And if she could do it, doesn't that hold a promise for all of us? This is really what this quality is about—somehow awakening to this capacity within ourselves.

Of course, we can learn it in certain ways through meditation. In the training I did in the monasteries, we would sit up all night, endure long sittings without moving, walk barefoot in the morning ten miles to get our food. There were endurance practices—monks who made vows to not lie down for a year, austerities like living in caves. The stuff young men like to do, testing themselves.

Now, of course, that's the hero's myth. The myth for women is quite different. For example, I think about when my daughter was born and my ex-wife went into labor. Her labor lasted almost three days because the contractions happened, but my daughter's head wasn't quite engaged. So the contractions kept

coming, but her cervix wouldn't dilate. We'd go to the hospital and they'd say, "No, no, no, go home." Three days and nights—it was like some monastic practice on steroids. Joseph Campbell wrote about this when he described the hero's journey. He said mostly men's initiation is an attempt to seek or discover what's quite natural for women. Whether it's giving birth or, in the feminine, giving birth to other things in the world, there's a whole different way of understanding that comes through having a female body. But even so, the gift underneath is to look and see who we really are.

I just came back from traveling in China for a few weeks with my beloved, Trudy. We taught in a twelve-hundred-year-old Zen temple where the abbot was very open to modern forms of mindfulness teaching, Western psychology, and trauma work. There was an enormous amount of trauma in the community around the temple, and he was interested in how that fit together with Buddhist psychology. It was actually very creative.

There we were in this thousand-year-old temple—a giant temple with lots of buildings—and in this big Buddha hall there were pictures on the walls of the great ancestors. Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, and Mazu, whose temple it was, all these great patriarchs. Trudy says at one point, "I'd like to teach a meditation that as far as I know has never been taught in the land of China in thousands of years. Please close your eyes." Everyone closes their eyes and she says, "I'd like you to visualize that you enter this great and august dharma hall, and you look on the walls and see the pictures of all the ancestors—and they're all women. The great Zen ancestors of thousands of years. Then you look up to the front of the hall and you see the abbess, who's always a woman, over generations, surrounded by all her chief disciples, also women, just because it's a bit easier to get enlightened in a woman's body. But men also can be enlightened, and we've saved a place for you in the back of the room. Also, we'd like to ask if you wouldn't mind helping in the kitchen afterward. It will be helpful because then you'll be able to make enough merit that perhaps in a future life you can be born in a woman's body."

The women in the room were all grinning like this. And the abbot actually appreciated it—he had a good sense of humor about it all. More than that, he understood that there was something that needed to change.

But we live in a society that in a way wants to put us to sleep. I've read this many times: the best adjusted person in modern society is the person who's not dead and not alive—just numb, a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to work for the society. But if you're fully alive, you constantly say no to many of the unhealthy processes of society—the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water, eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it's in the interest of modern society to promote those things that take the edge off, keep us busy with our fixes, and keep us slightly numbed out and zombie-like.

In this way, our modern consumer society itself functions as an addict. And you can hear it—great dilemmas? Maybe you should go shopping. So there's this force that wants to put us to sleep in some way.

And yet, there's another possibility. We all know it because it is who we are. When we sit and walk, practice meditation, do loving-kindness practice or compassion practice, the point in some way is to remember who we are as spirit—that we have a possibility to choose our freedom in any given circumstance. But it has this odd kind of paradox: even though it's always here, it also flowers with our dedication.

"Just as raindrops one by one fill the water jar, so with care and dedication, fill your life with goodness." This is a verse from the Dhammapada, the Buddhist teachings—that moment by moment, drop by drop, you can awaken. And somehow you begin to transform your body, your heart, your mind, your consciousness.

Otherwise, you live on automatic pilot, as Julia Child writes: "In department stores, so much unnecessary kitchen equipment is bought indiscriminately by people who had just come in for men's underwear." You can get seduced by the culture that says this will make you happy.

What happens in deep meditation—I just finished teaching a retreat with Trudy and a whole group of wonderful teachers here at Spirit Rock—is that sometimes when you get very still, the mind becomes clear and luminous. The body can dissolve into light. You have experiences of profound stillness or vastness of mind. And then certain qualities arise in consciousness, which are described in Buddhist psychology as the malleability and pliancy of consciousness. What it means is that when you become really centered and stable, you can place your attention somewhere and it just stays. It's like a well-trained dog: sit, stay.

You can turn your attention to a state or to a quality, and even more interesting, you can call up different qualities and the psyche—or the storehouse consciousness, whatever you want to call it—will allow them to arise. You might say in a very deep place, "May this consciousness be filled with joy," and it's like a video game or something. The body and mind just get filled with ecstatic joy. Okay, too much—dial it down.

The possibilities of playing in the realms of consciousness, the yogic possibilities, are really kind of fantastic and wonderful. But then, of course, there's the laundry—as you know from that book title, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. These experiences remind you, they show you who you are, which is a being of consciousness. You are loving awareness born into this body, a being of light. But then, as you learn that, the next task is to remember it, to embody it.

And you don't have to have those particular experiences, because we've all had experiences—walking in the mountains, or making love, or listening to a magnificent piece of music, or sitting at the bedside of someone who's dying in that mystery, or being there when someone's being born, or taking sacred medicine, or a hundred other ways that open us. We know we're not just this body. As we remember, as we meditate to remember and reawaken, that becomes more the way we rest and move through the world.

And the beautiful thing is that it's never too late to awaken, to remember. Never too late to start over.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an army vet. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see 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 though 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 one thousand homeless in this small city alone. And that is really one of the shames of our culture. It really is something for us to tend to.

Winter here in Northern California can mean cold rain and mud, and even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrated 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 him 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. I'd 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?

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eye, 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.

There's something about trusting, about seeing in each human being the dignity, the nobility, the possibility of awakening in every being, and knowing that it's never too late to remember. When you do, when you act with dedication and when you support that in another being, something remarkable unfolds.

Goethe wrote about it. When he talked about daring to dream, he said that when you dream and when you act, providence moves with you—which is a way of saying the divine or the mystery responds. When you turn your energy or your love or your dedication to something, somehow the universe knows it. That same universe that made you and makes everything.

Or as Helen Keller said, "Security is mostly a superstition. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

When you dare, when you direct yourself, when you're dedicated in some way, all kinds of surprising things happen. Your vision, your sense of the possibility of living in a freer way, of being awake, and the dedication to that vision—these are the key.

Henry Moore, the great sculptor, writes, "The secret of life is to have a task, a vision, something you devote your entire life to, and the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do." Isn't that interesting? So it's not so much a matter of checking the box off on your list—it's really something more magnificent and greater than that. It's a willingness to turn the soil and the compost of your life into something beautiful.

Alan Chadwick was a famous gardener and one of the fathers of the modern ecological movement who taught at the University of Santa Cruz. He gardened by growing soil to grow his plants. What he meant by soil was different than the Earth's surface. It meant a power in the universe that could be concentrated in gardening to capture cosmic magic. This was his kind of description of it.

Chadwick grew soil and planted seeds based on the relationship that existed between the Earth, its moon, the sun, the other planets, the weather, the way doves in the area cooed, mist in the trees, and everything you could imagine. When winter was very bleak, he'd sing about the energies under the surface of the earth: "Underneath, the seeds are full of life. This very moment, the seeds are waking up. They're pushing up to the sun. The doves are singing, coo, coo."

Once Chadwick took a UC Santa Cruz class to a junkyard lot that was filled with rusted-out cars, broken glass, chunks of cement, sand, and lots of abandoned trash. He asked the owner if his class could use the lot for an experiment to grow flowers and vegetables. The owner said, "Sure, but you are crazy. This soil is dead." The garden later became famous for its extraordinarily delicious vegetables and gorgeous flowers. They grew the soil and the plants followed.

Having a vision, having a sense of possibility and a dedication to it—this is everything. As someone said, life shrinks and expands according to one's courage and dedication. That's how it works.

And so in meditation, the same thing. You sit and some days it's boring. Some days it opens you to something beautiful, and some days you're just making lists and

kind of checking them off in your mind even before you've started your day. That's fine. Or you're at the end of the day and you're doing reruns of your conversations and so forth. And some days it's much tougher than that. Some days it's beautiful. But the beautiful ones or the difficult ones—they're not really the point.

This from Zen teacher Karlfried Dürckheim. He writes, "The person who, being really on the way, falls upon hard times in the world, will not as a consequence turn to that friend or those other friends who

offer them refuge and support 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. And in this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

And this is what you'll see, those of you who live in Santa Rosa and Napa Valley, Sonoma and places from the fire. The fire seems to destroy everything, and yet out of it also there is a spirit that grows. I know it—the store is open, the sign says, "What do you need? Come and take it." The neighbors come together and say, "We have and you don't—share it with us." There's a community spirit that comes in the difficulty that somehow illuminates the spirit in the hearts of everyone.

In spite of racism, tribalism, environmental catastrophes, political divisiveness—all the kind of troubles that we see—the power of love and determination is that medicine, is that capacity that will in the end transform it, that can and will. Nothing else really has that capacity.

There are terrible things that happen in the world based on people who are unafraid to kill, based on violence and those who are willing to commit it. And the only force that is strong enough, powerful enough to meet that is the force of love. As Martin Luther King said when his church was bombed, "We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering, and we will not hate you. We will wear you down by our capacity to love." Because in the end, we are connected. No matter what those who are frightened and those who fight say—we are connected. This is the truth.

Now traditionally, the kind of dedication to love or to care or to illumination, whatever your dedication might be—in Zen it begins with a vow. Each time you do a sitting: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all. Dharmas are infinite, I vow to master them. Obstacles are endless, I vow to overcome them." These kinds of vows, little vows.

Or Shantideva's beautiful vows that I love to recite. The Dalai Lama says in the morning when he wakes up: "May I be a bridge, a boat, a raft to help all cross the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp to illuminate the path in the darkness. And may I do so as long as sun and moon and stars and galaxies exist, until all beings are enlightened together." Amazing, beautiful, poetic vow. And what it speaks to is human spirit—what's possible for you to dedicate yourself to.

Napoleon said it at the end of his life: "The thing that astonished me most is that the sword is always beaten by the spirit." It is always true. Here he was, conquering all of Europe for a time anyway, yet he recognized that the sword is always beaten by the spirit.

So to what do you dedicate that spirit in your life? To love well? To be awake? What is it? "Set your heart on gold," says Rumi. Set your heart on something really beautiful. Who are you? And what can you do

with this life?

Now in Buddhist psychology there is a lot of emphasis on the power of dedication and intention. Short-term intention means that as you go through your day, when you get into conflict or you have trouble making a decision or some struggle of some kind, you take a pause—a mindful pause, a few breaths—and then simply ask yourself, "What's my best intention? What's my highest intention?" Very often the whole tone of your conversation will change, because there you are trying to be right or get back at somebody or prove your point or whatever. And you pause for a moment—or it's in your email or your text before you send the little text thing.

And you say, what's my highest intention? Oh, it's really to connect, or to work this out, or to find a way to love this person, or to listen—something beautiful. When you ask your heart, it usually answers that way. And then you reread the text and say, oh, I better change a few words there. And the whole tone changes. When you press send, you get an entirely different response. Or in the conversation, the tone of your voice changes. You may not even say very much different, but it has the quality of respect, or wanting to listen, or to learn, or to be open. In that simple moment of quieting yourself and asking, what am I dedicated to? What is my best intention?—everything gets transformed.

In the same way, there is long-term intention. That's like those Bodhisattva vows I just talked about, which is really setting the intention of your heart, like setting the compass for the direction of where you will go.

This is from Wendell Berry, the farmer poet. He writes: "So my friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the world. Work out of love 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. Plant sequoias."

Plant those things that you won't live to see, but that someone will. Plant a forest. Do something that won't compute.

Long-term intention is really not about what you accomplish or what you get, but rather what you plant and how you move, what kind of graciousness you can move through this world and what it is that you offer to it.

And then if you have a beautiful intention, make a beautiful vow or set your intention on those kind of things—then you lose an election. You start over again. Something doesn't work out. Einstein's dissertation was turned down as irrelevant and fanciful by his physics department. Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. In the first year, Coca-Cola sold 400 bottles. Sometimes you win and sometimes you don't. That is not the point. Because you will have praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain. Anybody not have that? Please raise your hand. You can have your eight dollars back or whatever it was. It's just how it is.

So then what do we do with it is really the question. What do we make of this in some way?

Dina Metzger, the poet, writes: "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."

It's a poem for Napa and Sonoma and Santa Rosa, and for beings all over the world. 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—because we do and we can.

One of the other things that's really important to say is that this capacity to start over, to listen to the compass of the heart that's built in you—you can see it all around you. Life wanting to renew itself. As Pablo Neruda said, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

Life wants to come back. All you have to do is watch toddlers. I love toddlers—the drunken sailor stage where they're just learning to walk. They try one step and they fall, then maybe get two steps and they fall again on their diaper. They fall like a thousand times, right? What do they do? Get back up again. And then they start cruising. And it's not singles bar cruising—there's a different kind of cruising. Just hanging on the edges of things.

Basically people are worried, "Oh, my child is slow to walk or speak or get out of diapers." No kid that I know goes to high school in diapers. It doesn't happen, right? The children want to become independent, and our spirit wants to become free. And I can hear my daughter's voice at two years old. One of her frequent phrases was, "Me do myself." You know, "Me do it, me." That little two-year-old voice saying, "I'm going to do it, I'm going to put on my shoes, me do it." There's some kind of native and natural opening to freedom that is part of your heart.

And the passage I read so often from Thomas Merton to the young activist where 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 bring about its opposite. As you get used to this you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness and the truth of the work itself."

There's something about dedication that's really setting the compass of the heart in a direction of awakening or love or remembering who you are, of embodying what matters to you in this world. And then there comes this beautiful trust somehow, like Pablo Neruda's poem: you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring.

The world is in a lot of difficulty now, as we know, in many ways. And yet at the same time, there's also less warfare than there's been in a lot of previous centuries, believe it or not, if you study it. There are a lot more resolutions of conflict happening not by war than used to be so. Very slow, we human beings, very, very slow. But we seem to be learning slowly. The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice, as we know. Sometimes it seems very, very long.

But then, here is Gandhi again, saying: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem

invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always."

And that's really the voice of a kind of truth about life that we can add our own heart to, our own love, our own trust to.

So many stories, but I think enough stories for tonight.

Close your eyes for a few minutes and just reflect—not as a meditation. You don't have to get in a weird posture. You're weird enough as you are without adding to it. But reflect on your own inner commitments or dedication. What matters to you? What have you set your own heart on? And if it's not so apparent, might today be a good day to listen and reflect on what it could be?

And what in your life best supports this dedication, this direction? You can know. You are free to choose. This is one of the great gifts of consciousness. You are loving awareness itself, and you can choose. And this is a great gift.

But most importantly, it's already what's in you, already what's in your heart.

On that day, Martin Luther King says, "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, that I was a drum major for peace. I want you to say I tried to love and serve humanity."

A spiritual life is like breathing in and out. In one breath you sit and quiet the mind and tend the heart. You remember who you are. And then in the next breath you get up and you offer your gifts to the world. You can't just have an in-breath or an out-breath. You need them both.

So let's just sit for another minute.

When you see the trick-or-treaters tomorrow, in addition to the costumes and the happy children over-amped from sugar and candy and delighted, also remember that Halloween is about mystery. Mystery—and spirits, and those who have died. And that's going to happen to you, by the way, just in case you've forgotten. The mystery of being a human being, and connecting not just with this world that we see, but the world that's greater that we're a part of.

So you can look at Halloween as a gateway to this mystery.

Have a good time.

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